

**An Exploration of the Relationship between
Gender Subjectivities and Educational
Capabilities of
Prison Leavers in England**

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Declaration

“I, Angelique Mulholland, confirm that the work presented in my thesis is my own. Where information has been derived from other sources, I confirm that this has been indicated in the thesis.”

For Orla Robyn, Luca Wren and the
little bird that flew too soon

What am I now that I was then?
May memory restore again and again
The smallest colour of the smallest day:
Time is the school in which we learn,
Time is the fire in which we burn.

Calmly We Walk This April's Day
Delmore Schwartz

Abstract

“Revolving door” offending, or persistent cycles of offending, are phenomena that have been associated with complex masculinities. In recent years, prison education has been posited as a ‘magic bullet’ to both reduce recidivism (reoffending rates) and engender a successful desistance journey (moving away from crime). Although the study of masculinities within the gendered institution of prison is an emerging field, and prisoners’ educational pasts and present-day capabilities are the subject of recent policy debates, the intersection between the two areas is under-researched. This thesis explores the nexus between education and gender in the lives of adult men who have experienced the English justice system, including single or multiple periods of incarceration. One central focus is to explore how insights into this relationship can support an understanding of subjectivity, power, violence and redemption in prison leavers’ lived experiences and educational trajectories, including in schooling, prison and the community. Using an interdisciplinary theoretical framework drawing on poststructuralist feminist epistemologies and narrative methodology, I interviewed 20 adult male prison leavers who were at various stages of their desistance journeys. This study reveals complex gender subjectivities both challenged and maintained in educational spaces and which depend on multiple and shifting axes of (dis)advantage including social class, race, (dis)ability, family background and age. Although some participants appear trapped in cycles of violent gender performativity linked with criminal trajectories, others have navigated their way through deficit educational discourses to occupy alternative masculine positioning, some of which appear to disrupt intergenerational patterns of violence and offending. For these participants, re-engaging with education has supported a move away from reoffending and they have embarked on their own journeys of belonging, engagement, reflection and hope.

Impact Statement

Research

The impact of this research is located within the establishment of a relationship between gender and education in the lives of formerly imprisoned men. In this interdisciplinary study, I have engaged with different theories, including feminist poststructuralist analysis, hegemonic masculinities theory and criminological theories. I have applied them in an innovative way to analyse how gender and education shape the lives of prison leavers. By examining this relationship, I have offered insight on how educational spaces offer ways for men to reflect and renegotiate masculine identities often associated with toughness and repeated performances of violence. Some men were able to rearrange their lives and invest in alternative discourses such as vulnerability and empathy thereby reshaping gender and learner subjectivities. This study has found that men who engage with education - on their terms - 'do gender' better, and move away from persistent cycles of offending and violence.

I have added further insights to scholarship on prison leavers' educational trajectories. I have deepened understanding of the school-to-prison-pipeline (STPP) by unpacking the complex, intersectional and multiple barriers boys from marginal spaces experience in schooling, including the role of the gendered peer dynamic. I have closely examined how educational processes, curriculum and relations can influence construction of gender subjectivities in prison, highlighting especially the role of Learning Disabilities and Differences (LDDs), social class, and violence in exacerbating or reshaping masculine identities. Findings suggest education is implicated in the reshaping of heteronormative roles which contribute to non-offender identities in the community after release from prison, and in some cases, support a disruption of the STPP for future generations. Violence has been investigated as a key theme, and an examination on how violent practices and identities interrupt educational trajectories contributes to research in this area. Finally, by providing a normative theoretical conception of education through the Capability Approach, I have re-framed the 'problem' of prison learners beyond reoffending and understanding disengagement from education as an issue of social justice.

Policy and practice

Policy initiatives should draw on the insights of prisoners (past and present) as a guiding tool using a gendered and intersectional lens to understand key issues. Findings from this

study suggest that the issues connected to reoffending were not related to unemployment and men struggled with breaking the law due to more complex, deep-seated and often gendered issues that cannot be addressed by vocational training in prison. I suggest diagnosis and support for LDDs should be prioritised above employability on release. This study has demonstrated the benefits of professional assessment and how it can be pivotal in supporting successful desistance journeys.

Reflecting a more progressive approach, I propose an exploration of alternative pedagogies and curricula which are gender-sensitive, and suggest that measures should focus on quality of life and flourishing after prison, rather than recidivism. In order to improve educational engagement in prisons, art, sociology and interest-based subjects should be offered to people in prison to support well-being and personal development. Further, skills based assessments conducted in the first week of imprisonment should be replaced with more learner friendly approaches which aim to support engagement rather than focus on skills' gaps and deficits.

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Abbreviations

ADHD	–	Attention Deficit and Hyperactivity Disorder
AP	–	Approved Premises
ASD	–	Autism Spectrum Disorder
BD	–	Bipolar Disorder
GCSE	–	General Certificate of Secondary Education
HE	–	Higher education
HMIP	–	His Majesty Inspectorate of Prisons
HMPPS	–	His Majesty Prison and Probation Service
IOPC	–	Independent Office for Police Conduct
IOE	–	Institute of Education
IPV	–	Interpersonal Partner Violence
LDDs	–	Learning Difficulties and Differences
MAPPA	–	Multi-Agency Public Protection Arrangement
MoJ	–	Ministry of Justice
NRC	–	National Research Committee
OCD	–	Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder
PET	–	Prisoners Educational Trust
PTSD	–	Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder
SEN	–	Special Educational Needs
STPP	–	School-to-Prison Pipeline
UCL	–	University College London
VPU	–	Vulnerable Persons Unit
YOI	–	Young Offender
YTS	–	Youth Training Scheme

Chapter One: Masculinity, Vulnerability and Education in Adult Male Prisoners' Lives

Introduction

When I started teaching in an adult male prison in 2016, suicide rates in prisons in England and Wales were at the highest level since records began (HMPPS Prisons Data, 2024). Men in prison are six times more likely to commit suicide than men in the general population (Fazel et al., 2017). Prison violence has exponentially increased over the past 10 years (Institute for Government, 2019), and this has often been reported in sensationalist media headlines involving gangs and drug abuse (Kotecha, 2024). It is also periodically at the centre of political debates, (UK Parliament, 2019) which often sideline other reasons for an increase in violence and largely focus on overcrowding and capacity (Ministry of Justice, 2024). Often, what is missing in these discourses, is the trauma, vulnerability and mental health crisis that many men in prison experience, and the lack of hope that grips their lives.

Prison education, often proposed as a 'magic bullet' to facilitate rehabilitation does not always feature prominently or positively in the most disaffected men's experience of prison (Skills Funding Agency, 2018; Slater et al., 2023). I begin this study by offering a biographical account of my time as an English teacher in adult male prisons across England, and how I acquired insights into the interior lives of the students in my class. In my first prison appointment, part of my job was to recruit students for my English classes; this involved knocking on dozens of cell doors every week, hoping to enlist new students. It was a tough sell. Many would politely shout, "No thanks, Miss!" and it was not until I created an "English Through Cooking" class that I finally achieved a full classroom. Every week we would cook and eat together around a table - a novelty and strong incentive in the prison space, where most meals are eaten in cells, on beds and next to toilets. Offering a space to 'break bread together', often provided an intimate setting where my students left the homosocial, overtly masculine spaces of the wings (living quarters), to talk openly about their past and present challenges. Some weeks, students would share disturbing stories of survival in prison, often involving violence; other weeks, upsetting stories from childhood would emerge, sometimes relating to educational trauma including painful memories of school exclusion. The vulnerability these 'tough men' had experienced and continued to experience, would surface, perhaps only to be concealed again once outside the classroom. I also frequently witnessed more destructive gender performances in the classroom, including disruptive behaviours, aggression and refusing to do work. (Archer & Yamashita, 2003; Epstein et al., 1998a; C. Jackson, 2006; Phipps, 2017a). As I

will go on to argue in this thesis, in order to survive prison life, men must perform a tough masculinity in order to navigate prison successfully (Toch, 1998). Studies demonstrate that men in prison distance themselves from vulnerability in order to achieve this (De Viggiani, 2003; Maguire, 2021; Ricciardelli, 2015) but scant attention has been paid to the role of education and educational spaces in the performance of these behaviours in prison.

In 2022, there were 85,951 prisoners in England and Wales, 96% of whom were men (Sturge, 2023). It is a global, social phenomenon that men are over-represented in the justice system. People in prison are generally from deprived backgrounds (Ginn, 2013) and have experienced interrupted educations, often involving undiagnosed learning difficulties and/or disability (LDDs), truanting and permanent exclusion from school (Champion & Noble, 2016; Coates, 2016; Speilman, 2022; Williams et al., 2012). Evidence suggests that boys who are from marginalised communities, including ethnic minorities, experience the highest rates of educational underachievement and disengagement (Lammy, 2017). Although it is widely understood that pathways into offending cannot be attributed to any one factor (Filkin et al., 2022), the link between boys' struggles with formative education and future criminal trajectories is well-established (Graham, 2014); this phenomenon is referred to as the "School-to-Prison-Pipeline" (Bryan, 2017, 2020; Hirschfield, 2008; Kim et al., 2021). The ongoing educational disengagement and struggle that some prisoners experience during and after prison is rarely a point of contention in prison research (Slater et al., 2023). In some ways, this is a surprising oversight as emergent studies have suggested that one outcome of prison education can be a higher likelihood of employment on release and a reduction in reoffending rates, also referred to as 'recidivism' (Davis, 2013; HMPPS, 2018; Ministry of Justice, 2017). Further studies go beyond recidivism and employability skills and suggest that prison education can contribute to the wider desistance journey (moving away from crime) and support former offenders to become contributing citizens (Champion & Noble, 2016; Nichols, 2017).

One study reports only 33% of prisoners engage in prison education courses (Hurry & Rogers, 2014). Crease & Cara's study on prison educational engagement for maths and English courses states, "The overwhelming majority of prisoners, including those with the lowest skills levels, never enrol on a functional skills course, and there is no data to explain this" (Cara & Creese, 2019, p. 133). Functional skills courses provide the basics in English, Maths and Information and Communication Technology (ICT) to support people in prison to gain a skillset that reflects the education levels of the rest of the population. These courses have a long-standing problem with participation. In 2024, just over 44,000 people in prison took an initial English and maths assessment. The results indicate over

70% are operating at Entry Level 1 – 3, which is equivalent to primary school age, however, just over 17,000 achieved a Functional skills qualification in the same period. (MoJ, 2024). The perceived solution to ‘lack of attendance’ by Ofsted often involves improvement measures to prison education management and quality of teaching (Speilman, 2020). The narrative surrounding prisoners’ educational trajectories focuses on a problem or deficit discourses (Valencia, 2010a); with top-down policy approaches proposing how to ‘fix’ skills’ deficits through a vocational model of education (Nichols, 2021). Despite the omnipresence and evidence of destructive masculinities throughout prison - including drug abuse, self-harm and violence - there appears to be no recognition in policy or prison management on how these behaviours influence educational engagement and gender performances in the prison classroom. As Zampini et. Al, argue, in one of the handful of studies that acknowledges the gendered nature of education in the carceral space,

Gender norms are suggested to be institutionally re-produced as certain forms of masculinity and femininity are expected and encouraged in carceral conditions and beyond... Classrooms, and particularly prison ones, can too easily become micro-climates of traditional gender roles reinforcement. (Zampini, Österman, et al., 2019, p. 72)

The point of the biographical opening to this study is that as a prison teacher, I witnessed adult male prisoners’ vulnerability in educational spaces, and this experience led me to research further into the relationship between education and gender in adult male prisoners’ lives. After discovering a dearth of empirical research in this area, I decided to probe much deeper into the factors that influence men in prison to move away from education, and towards re-offending, and it formed the genesis of this research project. Departing from top-down policy initiatives on improving education provision and teaching, my research has instead focussed on the deeply personal educational journeys of men who experience prison. This study maps how the lives of men in prison are shaped by powerful social forces within schooling, often causing trauma later on in adult life, including deep-seated educational disengagement. Focussing on understanding their subjectivities, this research aims to amplify adult male prisoners’ voices and centre their lived experiences. The following sections in the remainder of this opening chapter map the educational disengagement and vulnerabilities adult male prisoners experience, offer a theoretical orientation to the study and concludes with the research questions and a detailed overview of the study.

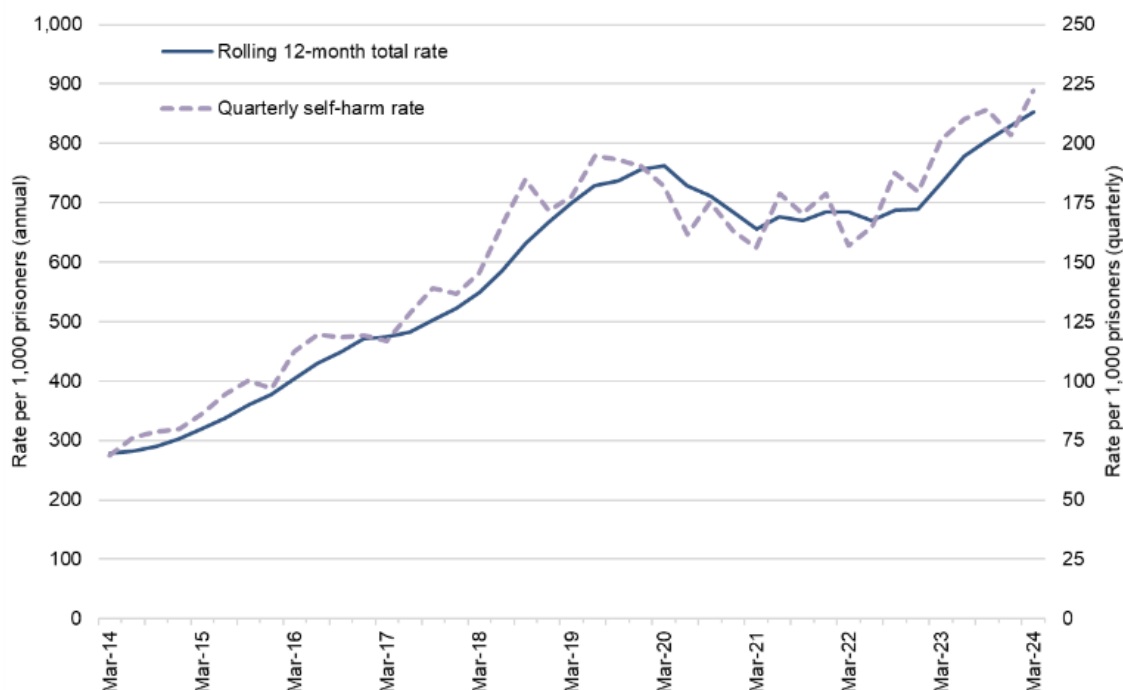
Adult Male Prisoners: Educational Disengagement and Social Vulnerabilities

In this section, I offer an account of the educational backgrounds and characteristics of men in the justice system including how disengagement begins in schooling. I also chart the social adversities and vulnerabilities that many men in the prison population experience throughout their lives, including in prison. I argue men in prison are deeply affected by the volatile, composite, homosocial environment in which they are expected to engage with education, often after many years away from the classroom. Despite a wealth of empirical evidence that victimisation is high among the adult male prison population, I offer reasons why male prisoners are not deemed vulnerable in public discourses (Rainbow, 2024). I argue that a subsequent focus on masculinities is crucial to understanding how educational journeys are shaped and influenced.

Prisons are extremely violent places (Toch & Kupers, 2007; Van Der Vorst et al., 2023) where many men experience victimisation. In recent years, there has been a dramatic increase in violence, disaffection (Ismail, 2020) and some of the highest self-harm rates since records began (MoJ, 2020). The rate of assault in 2024 was 342 assaults per 1,000 prisoners (29,881 assaults), compared to 123 per 1,000 in 2003 (Ministry of Justice, 2025b). Austerity cuts have left the prison population without the level of professional help needed to support mental health (Ismail, 2020). Studies reported that the prolonged lockdowns during and post-Covid-19 has exacerbated the situation (HMPPS, 2020; Johnson et al., 2021; Maycock, 2021).

Figure 1

Self-harm rates per 1,000 prisoners March 2014 – March 2024



Source: Safety in Custody, 2024

The prison population often experiences social exclusion, poverty and numerous health inequalities long before entering custody. As Baybutt et al. argue, crime is largely perpetrated by those who are “coming from and returning to the poorest or most socially excluded sections of society” (Baybutt et al., 2019, p.793). People in prison are more likely to have experienced: the care system, abuse as a child, homelessness, drug and alcohol addiction, unemployment and mental health issues including a higher likelihood of having experienced psychosis, and to have attempted suicide before entering prison (Prison Reform Trust, 2019; Williams et al., 2012).

Men who have contact with the justice system also experience a range of educational vulnerabilities and are more likely to be from marginalised communities. The lowest achieving groups at General Certification of Secondary Education (GCSE) levels in England and Wales are consistently White British boys, Black Caribbean and White and Black Caribbean boys from working-class backgrounds and households that experience economic inequalities (Strand, 2021). These same social groups are over-represented in the justice system. Despite representing 18% of the general population (Office for National Statistics, 2024), 27% of people in the justice system belong to an ethnic minority (Small,

2019). Leaving school early, truanting and exclusion are all higher among the prison population compared to the general population (Williams et al., 2012). Data collected by the Ministry of Justice (MoJ) suggested that on initial screening, 26% of learners describe experiencing a learning difficulty/disability (LDDs).

A report by the Criminal Justice Joint Inspectorate (CJJI, 2021) suggests that nearly half of those entering prison have some form of neurodivergence that “impacts their ability to engage” (p. 8) with prison processes. Further, a qualitative report conducted by the Prisoners’ Educational Trust (PET) examined the experiences of prisoners with LDDs and suggested that they were three times as likely to have spent time in the segregation unit and were also more likely to: experience bullying and depression, to struggle with prison bureaucracy, and be restrained by prison staff (Talbot, 2008). A more recent report, *Not just another brick in the wall*, by the Education Committee suggests that the need to address LDDs in the prison population is urgent and extensive, yet existing tools and resources are not fit for purpose (Education Committee, 2022a).

After leaving prison, men experience many of the same problems they experienced before prison, including homelessness, drug and alcohol addiction and untreated mental health conditions (Nugent & Schinkel, 2016; Roman & Travis, 2004). Recidivism (reoffending) rates are very high in England and Wales; Adults released from custodial sentences of less than 12 months had a proven reoffending rate of 56.9% (MoJ, 2025). One study argues that living with stigma, exclusion and “feelings of shame and low self-esteem” (Honeywell, 2021, p. 7) are the hardest barriers prison leavers must navigate in the community post-release.

Despite the evident vulnerabilities and social adversity men in the justice system experience, there is general reticence in public discourses to understand men’s vulnerabilities in prison. Rainbow Sloane (2018) discusses the ‘uncomfortable truth’ about male prisoners and vulnerability: that victims and offenders can sometimes be the same people. She argues this reality is not compatible with the concept of ‘the ideal victim’ (Sloane, 2018). Using Christie’s (1986) arguments on the idealised form and socially constructed ‘ideal victim’ – she argues that men in prison, despite reporting high levels of victimisation and vulnerability, are denied ‘victim status’. According to Christie, the ‘ideal victim’ is someone who falls into stereotypical constructs of sick, weak and old. Further research argues that the victim construct is also grounded in gender relations and inequalities - ‘ideal victims’ are female and ideal male perpetrators are “big and bad” (Duggan, 2018, p. 1). These stereotypes are further intersected with race, where Black men are positioned within the “hypermasculine, hypersexual, threatening, big, Black man

trope” (Long, 2021, p. 351), used historically to justify enslavement. Sloane argues that men in prison are also denied victim status as they are the cause of others’ victimisation and this trumps their own difficult beginnings: they are foremost “big and bad” (Rainbow, 2024, p. 271), complicating their vulnerable positioning further.

Deconstructing victim/offender binaries is a useful springboard for enquiring further into the nature of male vulnerability and educational engagement in prisoners’ lives. Focusing narrowly on victimisation or perpetration can reify dualistic versions of gender roles and stereotypes, especially for people in the criminal justice system (Miller, 2002). By drawing upon gender theory, intersectionality and feminist praxis in the next section, I offer a way of unpacking the complexity of gendered identities, behaviours, attitudes and values of adult men in the justice system, moving beyond victim/perpetrator dichotomies, or ‘ideal’ victims or offenders. One of the central aims of this project is to centre men’s subjectivity and offer an understanding of how ‘doing gender’ (West & Zimmerman, 2009) shapes their educational and life trajectories.

Prisoner Journeys: Power and Subjectivity

The analysis of prison leavers’ journeys presented so far highlights the many barriers they experience to living a fulfilling life. I argue that issues of disadvantage, power and powerlessness are central to understanding how men in prison navigate educational spaces, and especially how they negotiate inequality within institutions. In this section, I offer a theoretical orientation to the project, and many of the ideas discussed here will be picked up again in Chapter Four. I draw on Foucault’s (1975) work on discourse and power, before discussing the work of Judith Butler (2006), exploring their ideas on gender subjectivity in order to interpret and unpack prison leavers’ journeys. Finally, I offer an account of the Capability Approach (Sen, 1999; Nussbaum, 2000), a partial theory of social justice which I will use as a tool to interpret educational trajectories and freedoms.

Qualitative criminologists, through their empirical work, have centred the journeys and lived experiences of prisoners and former prisoners with many focusing on the central aspects of imprisonment: institutional power and resistance; identity, positionality and biography; and rehabilitation and desistance beyond the prison gate (Bosworth et al., 2005; Crewe et al., 2017; Duguid, 2000; Jewkes, 2005; Liebling et al., 2019; Maruna, 2001b). These insights have generated knowledge on how prisoners experience the world and many academics have drawn on Foucault’s seminal work *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (Foucault, 1975) to explain how subjects are constituted and then negotiated within the relations of power.

Foucault's (1975) work remains influential in both the fields of criminology (Garland, 1997) and education (Allan, 2022). They offer a defining contribution on the development of the concepts of 'discourse' and 'subjectivities' by scrutinising the history and practices of modern-day imprisonment. In analysing power and identity, force and control, hierarchies, exclusion and subjugation, they describe how people's 'subjectivities' are produced through discourse, "particular truths" (Allan, 2022, p. 22) and the 'discursive practices' of institutions. Ball explains, "Discourse is the conditions under which certain statements are considered to be the truth..." (Ball, 2013, p. 19). Further, Baxter adds that,

discourses are forms of knowledge or powerful sets of assumptions, expectations and explanations, governing mainstream social and cultural practices. They are systematic ways of making sense of the world by inscribing and shaping power relations within all texts, including spoken interactions. (Baxter, 2003, p. 8)

Foucault (1975) argued that discourse was present in the language, the systems and the practices of institutions. People's subjectivities are constituted by discourse but are also projects of becoming where "some possibilities of freedom may be achieved" (Ball & Stephen, 2013, p. 125). Foucault's early work was focused on exploring and exposing the relations of power bound up in the formation of subjectivities. Lamela & Rodrigues (2017) remark that Foucault sought to configure how people are "capable of being shaped and controlled in the attempt to reconstruct identities that can fit the behavioural patterns required by living in society." (Lamela & Rodrigues, 2017, p. 27). In the context of the prison, Foucault (1975) describes how "docile bodies" (Foucault, 1975, p. 135) are moulded by institutional discursive practices. Foucault maintained that living outside of discourse – and so not complying with 'regimes of truth' and not taking part in discursive practices – is to be rendered unintelligible, to be excluded.

In later work, Foucault also argued that subjectivities can develop and move beyond what society expects of them; Mendieta, cited in Ball, articulates it as, "Because we have become, we can also become different." (2011, Pg. 122). These ideas are captured under the umbrella of Poststructuralism. This theoretical orientation captures the development of personhood, problematising how a person becomes who they are, how they negotiate barriers and why. Haslam argues, through a poststructuralist lens, prisoner's stories "are constructed in large part as social critiques" (Haslam, 2005, p. 4) and the understanding of an individual's journey can give insight to contemporary oppressions of the day. This understanding of personhood is highly salient in understanding the trajectories of men in the justice system especially those who have experienced exclusion, stigma and living life on the "margins of the margins" (Maguire, 2021, p. 200).

Gender Subjectivity: Navigating ‘Gendered Regimes of Truth’

Despite Foucault's (1975) significant contribution to understanding the nature of human development, Pemberton (2013) argues that they “pay no attention to the sex, gender, or sexuality of prisoners or to whether the institution of the prison or the norms instilled through disciplinary power might be gendered” (Pemberton, 2013, p. 151). I argue that in order to understand the shaping of subjectivity under the surveillance of powerful gendered institutions and navigate ‘regimes of truth’, it is important to centre gender in understanding prison leavers’ lives. I draw upon the work of philosopher and post-structuralist feminist theorist, Judith Butler (1997, 2004, 2011) and will use their theories on gender subjectivity, performativity, exclusion and alterity to understand the educational experiences of formerly incarcerated men.

Described as an “interlocuter of Foucault” (McKinlay, 2010, p. 232), Butler (2006) explores the precarity of gendered identity and the importance of investigating the constitution of subjects within the “heterosexual matrix” (Butler, 1990, p. 6). By coining the term “The Heterosexual Matrix”, Butler argues that both gender and ‘sex,’ are not real, but instead are a “regulatory fiction” (Butler, 1990, p. 180) that is framed by a “hegemonic cultural discourse predicated on binary structures that appear as the language of universal rationality” (Butler, 1990, p. 13). For Butler, there is nothing natural about gender; subjects are always in flux and continually striving to be intelligible (and acceptable) to others through performative acts. McKinlay argues that “identity is always – indeed is only – process. Identity is never fixed or stable, even provisionally, but always becoming” (McKinlay, 2010, p. 234). Butler argues that navigating gender regimes, or “becoming a gender...[is]...laden with sanctions, taboos, and prescriptions” (Salih, 2004, p. 26) and can render minorities more vulnerable to violence. They argue further that vulnerability is inextricably tied to corporeality and the human experience. In navigating institutions and social life, those living on the margins experience higher levels of precarity (2004b).

It is the central task of this project to understand how prison leavers navigate these prescriptions, sanctions and gendered regimes of truth. After Carmody (2003), Cover (2014) argues that, “men are multiply-constituted subjects developed within broad relations of power who, although often complicit with masculine violences, are open to both subjection and resistance of normative modes of behaviour and being” (Cover, 2014, p. 440). In this research, I argue that men in the justice system are dynamic subjects constituted through hierarchical gender regimes and gendered spaces that can demand violence and other harmful behaviours, which can result in exclusion and reduced well-

being. This project seeks to understand how educational discourses both can disrupt and exacerbate trajectories of complex masculinities, including criminal behaviours.

Educational Capabilities: An Issue of Social Justice

In order to interpret the complexity of prisoners' educational trajectories, I have chosen to use a normative construct of education detailed in the Capability Approach (CA). Developed by Amartya Sen (1999) and Martha Nussbaum (Nussbaum, 2000), the CA is a partial theory of social justice which places education at the heart of an individual's capability to lead a flourishing life.

Capabilities are the freedoms and valued opportunities people have to expand their horizons and live a good life (Walker & Unterhalter, 2007, p. 8). Both Sen (1999) and Nussbaum (2000) argue that the capability to be educated is fundamental to this process, and that without quality education, an individual experiences "unfreedoms" (Sen, 1999) and, ultimately, is harmed (Terzi, 2007). Cin and Walker (2016) argue that this conception applies to everyone equally and posit that individuals are of "equal moral worth, and the subject of their own lives" (Cin & Walker, 2016, p. 138). The CA therefore advocates for all individuals, with their diverse beginnings and biographies, to have the opportunity to engage with quality education in order to develop 'beings and doings' which constitute a life worth living. If an individual cannot flourish in education due to biographical, social, cultural or pedagogical constraints (Walker & Unterhalter, 2007), then it becomes an issue of social justice. This understanding of education is highly salient for people living on the margins of society who have experienced the justice system. As I have presented in this thesis so far, many people in prison have been deprived of a quality education and have subsequently been harmed in diverse social spaces in their lives.

The CA also distances itself from human capital or meritocratic approaches which focus primarily on preparing individuals for future employment. (Walker, 2012). Walker (2012) inquires,

Are we asking the right question when we privilege economic growth? Should we be asking what it means to be human, what it means to live a fully human dignified life, what education contributes to this, and how we assess its contribution? (p. 384)

Prison education in England and Wales is based on a vocational model which aims to support prisoners back into employment on release from prison (MacKenzie, 2020). This can be viewed as a 'human capital' approach to education which places emphasis on people's individual contribution to a nation's wealth generation through their skills and work outputs (Gray, 2017). Educational capabilities scholars argue this model of education does

not address issues of inequality and exclusion adequately (Walker, 2012). Shining a light on the debates around the human capital approach, I aim to scrutinise the constraints individuals experience in participating in education through the life course. I aim to explore the types of educational opportunities they have access to, and the capabilities and inequalities (re)produced through education as a consequence. Mackenzie (2020) argues that the CA offers an evaluative space in which to examine the barriers which can reduce a person's capability to engage with education and, for the prison population, take the "early steps towards desistance" (p. 3). I focus especially on the barriers and constraints to participating in education throughout prison leavers' lives, and use this as a springboard to discuss further intersecting disadvantages, including gender and gender regimes.

Capabilities gained in and through education have been conceptualised to unpack gender-related educational inequalities, mostly in the global south (Sen, 1999; Nussbaum, 2000; Unterhalter, 2007). The CA has also been used to theorise how gendered constraints can potentially be overcome through education (Cin & Walker, 2016). Unterhalter argues that analysis should move 'beyond access' to education, and rather focus on what cultural and social constraints impede individuals from gaining educational well-being and living flourishing lives (Dejaeghere, 2020; Nussbaum, 2000; Robeyns, 2007; Vaughan & Walker, 2012). This line of argument is highly relevant to the current study as every imprisoned person has access and the right to education, in both schooling and later in prison and the community, yet some participate and flourish and others do not. The CA will be used to conceptualise the processes involved in creating these disparities and also envisioning an alternative mode that supports individuals' flourishing

Research Gaps, Questions and Aims

Despite the gendered nature of the prison population and the focus on education as a cornerstone of rehabilitation, there is a dearth of research on how gender interacts with education in the lives of men who have experienced prison (Maguire, 2021). The reticence to focus on gender in prison education research has also been reflected in the dearth of gender theory and exploration in the field of criminology. Feminist criminologists point out the canon's "gender blindness" (Gelsthorpe & Morris, 1998, p. 98) and document how women's experiences of the justice system were overlooked, and men's criminal trajectories were often discussed within working-class stereotypes (Collier, 1998). Collier (2019) has argued that feminist criminology has "challenged a positivist model of crime and emphasis on individual pathology – a model that has dominated, and in many respects still dominates" (p. 499). Centring gender subjectivity, and moving away from

pathology, this research focuses on the lives of prison leavers and endeavours to offer a greater understanding of how men in the justice system interact with education throughout their lives, and how their experiences of education are shaped by relations of power.

As chapter three explores in detail, the relationship between gender and education has been researched extensively in other educational spaces, especially in schooling (Leathwood & Francis, 2006). These insights have uncovered how children's fledgling subjectivities are shaped by school discourses (Youdell, 2006), gender performances (Epstein et al., 1998a; Evans, G, 2006a; Willis, 1978) and family background (Archer et al., 2023; Vincent et al., 2012b; Vincent & Ball, 2007). This study aims to capture the multiple layers that influence the shaping of gender subjectivities in educational spaces for men who have been incarcerated and the following research questions have been designed to uncover the relationship between gender and education in the lives of adult male prisoners. I have chosen to use the terms 'prison leavers', 'men in the justice system' and 'adult male prisoners' to describe the people who this research focuses on. The research questions centre on three points in time – schooling, prison and life in the community – with the overarching research question capturing the nexus between gender and education throughout the lifecourse. At the time of writing, I do not know of any other study which explores the relationship between education and gender in adult male prisoners' lives with the same depth and breadth and using an innovative, unique framework.

Overarching Research Question

How does the relationship between gender subjectivity and educational capabilities shape the lives of adult male prisoners?

Further research questions:

1. How have schooling experiences and the educational backgrounds of prison leavers influenced their educational capabilities and the shaping of gender subjectivity?
2. How are experiences of prison education, and relationships in prison, influenced by gender subjectivity and educational capabilities?
3. How does violence feature in the lives of men in the justice system, shape their gender subjectivities and influence their educational capabilities?
4. How do the intersections between gender subjectivity and educational capabilities upon re-entry into the community contribute to the struggles and successes of desistance?

Men in the justice system experience a range of adversities before entering prison, including educational and social vulnerabilities. The first question explores the early educational and gendered experiences of prison leavers. By answering this question, I offer a more nuanced understanding of how early experiences of school can shape gender subjectivities later on in adult life and impact individuals' educational engagement as adults, both in the prison and later in the community.

Through examination of the second research question, I move onto the homosocial space of the prison and with the aim of investigating how gendered practices, beliefs and identities shape subjectivities and navigation of prison, prison education and relationships. This part of the discussion also aims to understand how previous educational and gendered experiences discussed in the previous chapter feature in adult men's lives, and offer an exploration of how educational engagement contributes to the flourishing of some, but not others. This research question analyses how masculinities operate in hierarchies in the prison and how this impacts educational spaces, especially in relation to homosocial and heteronormative relations, pedagogies, subject choice and how identity can shape experiences further.

The third research question elaborates on how violence is a central feature in the lives of prison leavers before, during and after prison. I explore how violence witnessed in childhood shapes masculine subjectivity, and how it impacts educational capabilities. Further how is violence performed in the space of the prison and how does it impact education? Lastly, the fourth research question aims to better understand the relationship between gender and education in desistance journeys and the reoffending cycles of prison leavers. This question examines traditional masculine roles that can both harm and help the desistance process and investigates how education features in this relationship.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have presented an overview of the multiple barriers that prison leavers experience and offered reasons why adult male prisoners are not typically considered vulnerable, despite substantial evidence of the adversities they encounter as both children and adults. I have identified a gap in understanding of how prisoners' learning has previously been understood and offered a theoretical account of gender subjectivity to support an exploration of discourse and power when researching men in marginal spaces. I have also begun to explore educational journeys through a social justice lens, using 'The Capabilities Approach'. Exclusion and belonging, power and subjugation, violence and vulnerability, hope and hopelessness are some of the themes

which can help to understand the complexity of men's journeys through life before, during and after prison.

Organisation of Thesis

I will close this chapter by mapping the following nine chapters and provide an overview of this thesis. In these chapters, I will offer a further literature review of existing research, chart the theoretical underpinnings of empirical insights and build a theoretical and methodological framework. I will also map the research design and offer four chapters on findings, discussion and insights. The final chapter will offer conclusions, policy ideas and final reflections.

Chapter Two explores and reviews existing research on the educational trajectories of prison leavers, including schooling, prison education and education in the community post-release. Beginning with schooling, Chapter Two draws on empirical insights from the 'school-to-prison-pipeline', exploring the mechanisms of schooling and charting how marginalised boys are more at risk of entering the justice system, especially boys from ethnic minorities and working class backgrounds. Following these explorations, I discuss key issues and debates on prison education including models of educational provision, barriers to engagement and motivation to participate, and how education is positioned within discourses of rehabilitation, reoffending and desistance. Finally, I explore further studies which offer insights on the relationship between desistance and education, focusing on engagement in the community and how this can influence individuals' trajectories away from crime including redemption narratives, identity change and contributing to the community post-release.

Chapter Three synthesises the research on the relationship between gender and education and draws out the implications for this study. Beginning with insights on gender and achievement, I chart debates on boys' schooling and explore empirical insights on marginalised boys' underachievement, peer group behaviours, school discourses and the shaping of gender and learner subjectivity. Following this, I map the literature on prison masculinities, violence and education and explore gender performativity in the carceral space. I then investigate the relationship between gender and desistance journeys, offering perspectives on how traditional gender roles, such as 'father' and 'provider', can support identity transformation. The gaps that remain within the extant literature regarding the relationship between education and gender in the community post-release are also discussed.

Chapter Four explains the theoretical underpinnings of the current research and develops the conceptual framework for this study. This chapter establishes the importance of diverse gender theories including masculinities theory and feminist poststructuralist analysis to capture the complexity of the shaping of gender subjectivity in both educational and criminal justice contexts. I explain the importance of intersectionality theory and argue that understanding identity within this theoretical framework is a useful conceptual tool in this study. I also return to the CA and offer insights on education as a normative construct and exclusion from quality education as an issue of social justice. Lastly, I briefly chart the criminological theories discussed in the research, such as desistance theory, in order to explain how I interweave criminological insights into my theoretical framing.

Chapter Five sets out the research design and the methodological tools I used to collect, analyse and interpret the data. Beginning with an account of narrative criminology and applications of feminist epistemologies, I discuss how I use insights from both to craft an integrated methodological framework which captures the complexity of prison leavers' gendered journeys through crime and education. Following this, I surface my role as the researcher and discuss issues of positionality, autobiography, power and reflexivity. I further discuss the role of reflexivity when negotiating access during the global COVID-19 pandemic and discuss ethics, research partners, recruitment and selecting a sample. Next, I discuss in detail the backgrounds of the research participants, the interview process, and how I managed unexpected struggles ethically and compassionately. Finally, I offer a discussion of data analysis methods and final remarks.

Chapter Six discusses research participants' experiences of schooling, centring the genesis of educational disengagement and the early shaping of gender subjectivity. Disruptive behaviours, peer dynamics, hierarchies, exclusion and the experience of unmet needs connected to LDDs feature strongly in the narratives. School discourses are discussed in terms of how participants negotiated educational spaces and the consequent influence on trajectories beyond compulsory schooling. The 'school-to-prison-pipeline' is discussed and intersectional understandings of race are explored. Family adversity, childhood trauma and socio-economic deprivation are featured in the discussions. I conclude the chapter by arguing for a move away from deficit discourses on prison leavers' educational capabilities, and towards a multidimensional understanding of educational disengagement in schooling.

Chapter Seven focuses on the space of the prison. In examining this part of prison leavers' educational trajectories, I argue that the performance of prison masculinities is captured within the beliefs, values and identities that participants share in their

retrospective narratives. The hierarchical nature of the prison is centred in the analysis alongside an exploration of how the intersectional nature of identity shapes how participants interact with education. Barriers to participation are discussed including how normative codes of masculinity relate to educational vulnerability. Gender subjectivities are shaped by the processes, pedagogies and subjects of prison education and the discussion examines how certain curricula alleviated the pains of imprisonment including mental health issues and addiction. Educational assessments for LDDs are also discussed and mapped in the context of the diverse trajectories for those who received screening and help, and those who did not and typically remain disengaged from education. Finally, the chapter closes by positioning prison education as an escape for some and a saviour for others.

Chapter Eight focuses on the functions of violence in prisoner leavers' life trajectories and how violent performances can interrupt educational trajectories at different points in time. I discuss a range of violent behaviours and encounters, including routine violence in the family home, gang-related violence, prison violence and corporal punishment, elaborating on how these accounts (de)stabilise normative masculine positionings. Participants struggled to reconcile violence with evolving, non-offender identities and endeavoured to distance themselves from vulnerability in their accounts, often describing a by-stander role in the violence they witnessed. The socially constructed male body is problematised and the negotiation of normative masculine signifiers is considered in reference to both participants' narratives and the space of the interview.

Chapter Nine establishes a link between gender and education in desistance journeys. In this chapter, I focus on participant views on desistance and how many of them have moved away from crime, noting that some face more structural disadvantage and barriers than others. Exploring the "pedagogical self", I chart participants journeys through higher education following their release from prison. Evolving intellectual identities and investments in their children's education support the performance of normative masculine signifiers, as well as the redemptive signs of desistance. However, some participants struggle to re-engage with education and remain stuck in cycles of reoffending and harmful gender performances related to tough masculinities.

Chapter Ten draws together the final outcomes of the study to explicitly answer the research questions. I map the theoretical and empirical findings of the research and their implications as contributions to the fields of education, gender and crime. By expanding knowledge on how education and gender interact and feature in the lives of prison leavers, empirical insights are offered on the educative spaces of schooling, prison and in the

community post-release. I suggest that prison education policies should take into account gender and intersectional backgrounds when devising prison education policy, programmes, pedagogies and processes, including educational screenings, assessment and support. Finally, I close the research with a note on hope and hopelessness in the lives of prison leavers. I reflect that by understanding better how the relationship between gender and education features in the lives of imprisoned men, more men will be better supported to live more flourishing lives and move away from crime.

Chapter Two: Prison Leavers' Journeys Through Education

Introduction

In the first chapter of this literature review, I engage with the debates and issues that surround prison leavers' complex educational trajectories and capabilities. This chapter is divided into three sections; experiences of schooling and mapping the 'school-to-prison-pipeline' (STPP); experiences of prison education; and experiences of education in the community post-release. In these discussions, I present the evidence on how prison leavers interact with education at different points in time and demonstrate how these interactions can be both valuable and problematic, offering an understanding of the constraints and inequalities they experience. I aim to capture how fledgling subjectivities are shaped by biographical backgrounds, socio-political contexts and the discursive practices of schooling and prison. The focus is on the journey that prison leavers undertake and how diverse but interrelated issues can impact educational engagement and, ultimately, the capability to live a flourishing life.

As discussed in the opening chapter, it is generally understood that prison leavers have had poor experiences of schooling. Their school education is often incomplete due to leaving early or exclusion, and studies commonly cite underachievement, disruptive behaviour and truancy (Champion & Noble, 2016; Nichols, 2021). *The Bromley Briefings*, conducted by The Prison Reform Trust, suggest that 42% of prisoners were excluded from school and 59% truanted from school, compared to 5% and 1% of the general population respectively (Halliday, 2021). *The Edinburgh Study* (McAra & McVie, 2010), a key longitudinal programme of research on pathways into and out of offending for a cohort of around 4,300 young people found that a "broad range of vulnerabilities and social adversity" (p. 179) were fundamental to participants' entry into crime, including interrupted educations and exclusion from school. The study also found that pupils excluded at 12 years old are four times more likely to be jailed as adults. Williams et al. (2012) found that prison leavers who reported being excluded from school and truanting were more likely to be reconvicted on release from custody, than those who did not report these issues (Williams et al., 2012). Prisoners also regularly report childhood abuse, growing up in chaotic households, substance abuse and either intermittent or long-term residence in care facilities. Prisoners' adverse life experiences and vulnerabilities suggests that many people enter prison with significant educational and social disadvantages. Prison leavers do not start from a level playing field and there is clear inequality of educational capabilities which points to explanations for disengagement with education later in life.

I offer further evidence of prison leavers' early struggles with education by exploring a body of literature described as the STPP (Dancy, 2014). These debates centre the role of identity and especially race, and map how the discursive practices of schooling impact boys who are experiencing disadvantage. This view can support an understanding of how boys on the margins become 'prison-ready' (Graham, 2016).

Experiences of Schooling: Mapping the 'School-to-Prison-Pipeline'

The STPP is a body of work originating in the US that uses insights from criminological and sociological data and examines the funnelling of young men from school to prison, hence a 'pipeline' (Bryan, 2017). The STPP is one avenue of exploration to help understand some of the barriers discussed so far and focuses predominantly on the mechanisms of schooling. Race is a central concern in this body of work which explores the links between the social and academic marginalisation of primarily Black and Latino male students (in the US), and Black and White working-class and marginalised students in Britain (Graham, 2014; Stahl, 2017). The STPP includes a focus on underachievement rates, over-expulsions, overrepresentation in special and vocational education, oversurveillance, isolation and the subsequent funnelling of young men into the justice system (Bryan, 2020; Dancy, 2014a; Rosen, 2017). The STPP literature is informed by critical race theory (Delgado et al., 2012), which seeks to challenge normative discourses of Whiteness and Blackness in education, with the former being synonymous with signifiers such as school achievement, middle-classness, intelligence, and the latter relating to gangs, the 'underclass', and underachievement (Ladson Billings, 2011). Studies focusing on the STPP explore the experiences of Black boys within the school system and how their negative experiences, especially the disciplinary processes of schooling, contribute to an overrepresentation of Black men in the justice system (Sturge, 2023). STPP scholarship is in its infancy in the UK, but some UK studies have used this metaphor to explore the pathways between school and prison (Graham, 2014, 2016; Joseph-Salisbury, 2021; Stahl, 2017) and the following sections outline the key arguments drawing on a range of empirical studies, focusing in particular on school practices, exclusion and discipline.

Schools are key sites of socialisation, where childhood development extends beyond basic academic skills and can have "important implications for the long-term psychosocial well-being of individual children" (Sanders et al., 2020, p. 388). Schools which nurture cultures of inclusivity and respectful relationships have been shown to support the mental well-being of children, fostering a sense of belonging, especially for the

children most vulnerable to educational disengagement and exclusion (O'Grady, 2015; Sanders & Munford, 2016). The use of punitive disciplinary systems, such as exclusion, to control pupil behaviour in schools can have adverse and deleterious effects on student well-being (Hirschfield, 2008). Criminologists argue that exclusion from school results in a breakdown of school bonds and ex-pupils lose the protective factors of schooling, such as positive cultures of learning and social cohesion, whilst simultaneously navigating familial and personal adversity (Arnez & Condry, 2021; Laub & Sampson, R. J., 2001). McAra and McVie (2012) also argue that excluded children from socioeconomically deprived backgrounds are subject to hyper-surveillance and sanctions from teachers in the lead up to an exclusion and have difficulty in "resisting or shrugging off troublemaker identities" (p. 357) once applied, regardless of present classroom behaviour. This echoes findings from studies which document the targeting and over-discipline of young Black boys by White teachers during early years education that can contribute to poor educational and psychosocial outcomes (Bryan, 2017; Graham, 2016). Preconceived notions of students' abilities based on racialised identities have been documented by critical educationalists in the UK (Archer, 2008; Gillborn*, 2005; Youdell, 2003) and researchers have since sought to understand subcultural resistance demonstrated by Black boys to reported institutional racism in schools (Allen, 2012).

Wright (2016) argues that Black boys' underachievement in school positions them within a discourse of failure and characterises them as posing a "problem" to society beyond schooling. This labelling can be internalised and Black boys begin to believe they have limited options (Maylor et al., 2013). Such application of labels extends beyond schooling and into the criminal justice system, where young people who have been excluded from school experience oversurveillance by the police in the home, the street and areas of leisure (Wroe, 2021) and the deficit identity of being a 'troublemaker' becomes internalised. Critics are also mindful of schools' pathologising practices towards individuals and their families, and argue that wider circumstances of deprivation, vulnerability and exploitation must be taken into account when analysing trajectories into crime (Firmin, 2020). Stahl (2017) argues in their study on White working-class boys in South London that the STPP is supported through a culture of "low expectations from educators, deficit discourses, and institutional racism" (p. 94). Stahl also contends that disruptive and poor behaviour thrives in schools where proactive inclusion and behaviour management strategies are lacking.

Karen Graham's (2014) study – *Does School Prepare Men for Prison?* – argues further that labelling learners as 'naughty', segregating them from the mainstream pupils

into isolation rooms and neglecting learners' additional academic needs were some of the ways school enabled the participants in their study to become 'prison-ready'. Graham's (2014) respondents recalled being "locked away" (p. 831) in isolation rooms or standing in their own urine in front of the headteacher's office facing the wall, as they were not allowed to go to the toilet. The ease with which many of their respondents adapted to prison life suggests that they were already used to segregation during their time in school. Graham argues that their study "adds to the debate by showing the significance of the experience of school on the margins, and how this experience can serve as a preparation for a potential later life in prison." (p. 835). Studies also explore the overrepresentation of Learning Disabilities and Differences (LDDs) in exclusion and underachievement rates and how oversurveillance and disciplining can support the mechanisms of the STPP (Baldry et al., 2018; Kim et al., 2021). Kim et. al (2021) argue in their US study that over 60% of the youth justice population suffer from mental, emotional, behavioural and/or physical health problems, but may not always receive the support they need during schooling (p. 376). According to the theory of 'school failure', marginalised youths with LDDs are overly disciplined by being treated as 'problem kids' – the schools then impose extra surveillance and disciplinary measure against them rather than supporting them with their educational needs and differences. This exacerbates both their needs and disadvantage, as they continue schooling unsupported, and behaviours spiral both within and outside school, until they "ultimately, [get] involved in the justice system" (Kim et al., 2021, p. 376).

This exploration of the literature connected to the STPP, drawing from a range of studies and disciplines, focuses largely on the discursive practices of schooling and how aspects of school cultures – including oversurveillance, labelling and segregation – are inculcated in the funnelling of marginalised pupils into the justice system. This body of work contributes significantly to explaining the educational trajectories of prison leavers and offers important ways of understanding the barriers that excluded groups experience in schooling. These ideas are revisited in Chapter Three, which focuses on gender and education, contributing to analysis on the influence of gender in the intersecting web of disadvantage that prison leavers experience in schooling. Although there is an emerging body of literature on transitions out of post-compulsory education for people who experience the justice system, it is beyond the scope of this study to focus on this area comprehensively (see Maguire, 2021 for generative discussion in this area). The following section focuses on prison education including the barriers to engagement, aims and models of prison education, and, informed by these insights, the final section focuses on how education in prison contributes to desistance journeys.

Experiences of Prison Education

In the opening arguments I have presented so far, people in prison, largely men who have grown up in poverty settings and belong to marginal groups, have experienced difficult starts to education. Negative school mechanisms such as labelling, exclusion and harsh discipline can detrimentally impact marginalised groups and can further influence how they engage with education later on in life. I now turn to key literature which analyses the multiple constraints and barriers to prisoner participation in education, the types of education offered, motivations for engagement and how these intersecting issues play out within frameworks of rehabilitation and desistance.

I begin this section by offering a contextual understanding of the decline of prison estates over the last 15 years and how this has impacted prison education and engagement. Prison wide 'lockdowns', a protocol which confines all prisoners to their cells for extended periods of time, have been utilised extensively by prison authorities over the last 15 years, and long before the lockdowns connected to COVID-19 that restricted the activities of the civilian population (Maycock, 2021). The increase in the use of lockdown protocols stemmed from 33% of frontline prison staff being made redundant by the Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition government in 2012 in an austerity bid to make prisons more efficient (Ismail, 2020; MoJ, 2018). Lockdowns, before, during and after COVID-19 inhibited access to education – the physical space, the teachers, the resources – and therefore the potential for transformative change among prisoners (Czerniawski, 2016; O'Brien et al., 2022). Inspection reports since 2015 have reported widespread and chronic overcrowding, squalid conditions including rat infestations, unhygienic in-cell conditions and lengthy periods of confinement to cells without purposeful activity (Hardwick, 2015; Health and Social Care Committee, 2018). The COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 exacerbated many of the systemic issues brought about by years of underfunding, and reports suggest the most searing impact has been on prisoners' mental health (HM Chief Inspector of Prisons, 2021; Johnson et al., 2021; Maycock, 2021).

The prevalence of violence and self-harm among prisoners has increased significantly, with the Ministry of Justice's (2024) bulletin series on *Safety in Custody* documenting the highest rate of self-harm since records began in 2004. The deprivations of imprisonment, captured most starkly in Graham Sykes (2007) landmark study, *The Society of Captives*, originally published in the late 1950s, explores how people in prison, and predominately men, struggle with the "destruction of the psyche" (p. 64) during confinement and documents their attempts to cope with their sentences. Crewe (2011) revisits Syke's work and suggests that institutional demands in contemporary prisons have

created new burdens for prisoners, including the blunt markers of risk assessment, surveillance and categorisation which leave many prisoners in a “performative purgatory – always concerned that the wrong step might entangle them all the more in the carceral net” (Crewe, 2011, p. 516). Impoverished, highly stressed environments, reduced mental health and an increase in violence have reduced the prison population’s capability to meaningfully engage and participate in education.

Although the issues are systemic and chronic, prisons do not always exist in a state of reduced capacity. Prisons can also be functioning institutions where educational courses and resources are accessible. Studies demonstrate that people in prison cite multiple motivations for engaging in prison education (Brosens et al., 2016; Roth et al., 2017; Roth & Manger, 2014). Nichols (2021) argues that participation in education often constitutes part of prisoners’ approaches to alleviating the pains of imprisonment, especially escaping boredom. In prison vocabulary, education can be seen as “the bird killer” (Nichols, 2021, p.59), which means to kill off the boredom that serving a prison sentence can engender. “Box-ticking” (Nichols, 2021, p. 59) is also cited in studies as a motivation to complete educational courses, often in a bid to placate or please authorities and move onto the next part of their sentence, whether that is in lower risk category prison, or an enhanced wing with more privileges. Further reasons for engaging in education in prison are to improve employability and livelihood opportunities on release from prison and, for some, supporting identity development and moving away from crime. Brosens et al. (2016) discovered that people serving longer sentences were more likely to engage in educational courses in prison, because “they are more likely to ‘use their time’, as opposed to ‘filling their time’ ” (p. 680).

Despite some being motivated to attend prison education, there are widespread concerns regarding the quality of education in prisons and the extent to which people in prison have the capability to flourish. Government reports cite consistently poor Ofsted inspections, problems with the depth and breadth of the prison curriculum and a failure to effectively screen for and respond to LDDs (Coates, 2016; Education Committee, 2022a). The Education Committee (2022), tasked with exploring solutions to the problems associated with prison education, has suggested that prison education should be at the heart of the prison life and should incorporate better pay for attending educational activities, an introduction of a careers service, stronger links with employers, improved educational facilities (including digital infrastructure and resources) and more information-sharing both between departments and between prisons. They also recommend that beyond initial screening assessment for LDDs, which have so far only served new entrants

since 2019, people who are identified to experience an LDD should have access to an educational psychologist to identify their needs and offer meaningful follow-up and support. There are also concerns about how and when the initial assessment and screening processes are carried out. Educational assessments are conducted during the first week of a prisoner's sentence, which is a highly stressful time at which the individual is coming to terms with their imprisonment. Questions remain about whether this is the most appropriate time to be carrying out educational testing (Navarro & Clare, 2022).

As suggested in the previous section, the problems people in prison develop during schooling follow them through the prison gate. Many leave prison without basic qualifications (Hurry & Rogers, 2014) and prison leavers have interrupted and chequered educational pasts, yet there is very little research into understanding how negative experiences affect them in prison and beyond. Rogers (2016) argues that educational disengagement is a "process rather than a single event" (p. 5); I contend that understanding the complex factors underpinning these processes is central to developing meaningful insight into the barriers that exist to prisoners' participation and progress in education.

Does Prison Education Work? Key Issues and Debates Surrounding Prison Education

In this section, I further unpack key issues and debates on education in prisons including problematising questions of effectiveness. Nichols (2021) argues that prison education is often posited as a "magic bullet" (p. 15) in prison policy which can reduce reoffending and contribute to the "rehabilitation revolution" (Stickland, 2016, p. 4). In prison education policy and discourse, prison learners' educational histories are often positioned within a trajectory of "unfulfilled potential" (The Department of Education, 2017, p. 1), mostly citing underachievement, exclusion and social adversity in schooling and childhood development. The official aims of prison education, however, do not address disengagement or troubled experiences during schooling. Instead, the aims of prison education are located within a human capital and vocational model which seeks to improve work-related skills in order to increase employability on release and ultimately, with a view to reducing the burden on the taxpayer (MoJ, 2021). In most prisons in England and Wales, a range of courses are offered including Maths and English, Information Technology, vocational courses including construction and, for some, pathways to Higher Education (HE). Prison-university partnerships have offered programmes such as *Learn*

Together, an innovative initiative that supports university criminology undergraduates and people in prison to learn in a classroom together (Ludlow & Armstrong, 2016).

Prison education researchers Ann Reuss (1997) and Helen Nichols (2016; 2021) suggest in their explorative work on theorising prisoners' educational trajectories that prison education is an oxymoronic proposition. Citing clear disparities in their outcomes, as "one aims to punish and the other aims to provide personal development" (Nichols, 2021, p. 13), they argue, with a specific focus on HE in prisons, that education should encourage a range of skills and capabilities beyond employability skills. Nichols' (2021) research *Understanding the Educational Experiences of Imprisoned Men* provides a synthesis of existing research and builds upon key themes in prison education theory. Nichols' analysis explores reasons for participation, different models of education and how the pains of imprisonment impact educational trajectories. Nichols (2016) argues that trying to answer the question, "does prison education work?" (p. 70), is an oversimplification, and that it is better to explore "why education in prison works, who it works for, and in what circumstances" (p. 70). Nichols' helpful mapping on the effectiveness of prison education unpacks key issues related to employment, rehabilitation, reoffending and desistance.

Researchers have charted the history of prison education since the eighteenth century, and have suggested that rehabilitation of offenders has been one of its stated aims as early as the late nineteenth century (Behan, 2014). Higgins (2021), however, problematises the concept of rehabilitation and describes it as a "much-contested and ambiguous concept within the field of criminology [which] can be understood as both a process and an outcome" (p. 145). Higgins argues that the etymology of the word 'rehabilitate' is problematic as it conveys the return of an individual to a previous state or identity. In the case of those who are being rehabilitated, Higgins asserts, the majority of people in prison have experienced health inequality, educational disadvantage, poverty, violence and trauma. Returning to neighbourhoods where these disadvantages pervade after prison renders rehabilitation programmes "recycling centres for the poor" (p. 146). Further, Higgins proposes that a model for prison education should be one based on individuals' freedoms and that it be divorced from political goals such as economic gain or public order. When education is premised on threat reduction or upskilling for future employment rather than based on promoting individuals' freedoms, Higgins contends that prison leavers will continue to be alienated, ostracised and exist on the margins of society causing an "us and them" environment. In sum, Higgins (2021) argues that the rehabilitative model of prison education does not adequately acknowledge the poverty and

structural disadvantages which people in prison have typically experienced in their lives, and crucially, will be returning to upon their release from prison. This view chimes with the CA's conception of education which propounds taking into account the structural disadvantages that people experience and the barriers that many face in educational spaces. The CA advocates for a model of education which is based on the freedom to achieve the life one wants to lead, and which is not based on instrumental goals that focus on state aims or intentions (Robeyns, 2006).

Despite areas of creativity and humanistic models of education, the main intention of prison has been to support people to get a job upon release. A recent policy paper on prison education states, the service: "will make sure offenders can improve their basic literacy and numeracy, as well as acquire further vocational qualifications, like construction and computing, to make them more employable when they leave prison" (MoJ, 2021, p. 3).

Capabilities researcher MacKenzie (2020), following Sen (1999), acknowledges the importance of skills-based learning in decreasing social exclusion and increasing work-based capabilities through education and enhancing social mobility. DelSesto (2022) argues that gainful employment supports a move away from reoffending, as "it introduces people to pro-social co-workers and creates space to incorporate their work into their identity, priorities, goals and relationships" (p. 453). Some studies have shown that people who engage in prison education, attending any course or subject, are less likely to reoffend on release and more likely to be employed (Davis, 2013; Nally et al., 2012). Education has been described as a 'hook for change' (Szifris et al., 2018) and a turning point for some people in prison (Runnell, 2017).

Jones and Jones (2021) concur that greater scrutiny of the vocational model of prison education is needed. They argue that the type of education offered in prison is critical to the skill and identity development learners will take into the wider community after release, and that this may have an effect on reducing reoffending. Their study suggests that HE, as opposed to employment-based education, offers enhanced opportunity to develop a more "holistic educational experience" with a focus on critical thinking skills (Jones & Jones, 2021, p. 27).

Costelloe and Warner (2014) and Behan (2014) also question the philosophical model of vocational education in prisons and how this can affect desistance and consequent identity development. Costelloe and Warner explore the differences between vocational models of education, whose long-term goal is employment, and adult education models which focus on the whole person. They state that holistic models of education involve people in prison "becoming aware of new potential within [themselves], finding new

interests, growing in self-confidence and self-esteem, and growing in understanding, in particular in social and civic awareness” (Costelloe & Warner, 2014, p. 180).

Although employment has been proven to be related to a reduction in reoffending, many of those who do reoffend cite much deeper, more complex problems than not having a job as the cause of persistence with crime, including problems with addiction and unresolved childhood trauma. (Cesaroni et al., 2023). Costelloe and Warner (2014) argue further that a focus on manual labour within a vocational model also feeds into a punishment model which “fits with attitudes in welfare policy which see work, especially hard manual work, as an appropriate punishment generally for the poor and marginalized” (p. 180). Behan (2014) further argues that vocational models are outcome-driven, and enveloped in the “murky business of measurement and evaluation” (p. 27). They suggest that examining the processes underpinning transformation through education in prison would be more fruitful as this could capture the “complex development of human change” (Behan 2014, p. 28) more readily than a narrow definition of change, such as recidivism (reoffending) rates (MacKenzie, 2020).

In order to illustrate this point further, Costelloe & Warner (2014) lean on the Council of Europe’s (1990) philosophical approach to prison education and how its application in Norway differs to the model applied in England and Wales. Nordic prisons view their prisoners as citizens who have been harmed by society; in the UK, the view is that they are offenders who have harmed society. Of course, both interpretations may embody elements of truth, however the values underpinning imprisonment in England and Wales is one of punishment and retribution (Liebling & Arnold, 2005) rather than supporting people with complex needs from disadvantaged backgrounds to move forward. (Higgins, 2021) Costelloe and Warner advocate that a model which focuses on the whole person would not only take into account intersectional understandings of prisoners’ disadvantage but also viewing education as a “an end in itself, not just a means to an end” (p. 177). This premise, pertaining to ends and means, is found in Sen’s (1999) CA in which the value of education is conceptualised a valuable freedom in itself. (Robeyns, 2017). The vocational model of education, by contrast, conceptualises developing educational capability as means to get a job and create economic prosperity for both the individual and the state. CA scholars and Costelloe and Warner argue that education should be for the person, a holistic endeavour designed to promote flourishing, identity development and ultimately a move towards citizenship rather than a return to offending.

Studies which highlight the positive link between HE and identity change in prisons offer examples of how capabilities through education can be developed to support an

individual to flourish in society. In Reuss's (1997) study, she argues that engaging in a course of HE in "prison can effect change or transformation in prisoner-students who assimilate the course material in a complex process of learning and social interaction which is 'woven', or synthesised into their life experience" (p. 2). Reuss (1997) taught sociology in a category B prison¹ and over a period of three years documented and analysed their personal processes of engagement and change. Their findings suggest that their students interacted with HE learning in a profound way, and by directly addressing their "personal history" the teacher can support student-prisoners to scrutinise their place in the world by better understanding the workings of society. Duguid's (2000) study also found that supporting participants to make links between their past and present educational trajectories led to increased political awareness and better-informed decisions post-release. As discussed, critics of the current vocational model argue that prison education should be person-focused, not prison-focused, and an understanding of how prison education intertwines with each person's journey, especially on issues of disengagement and intersectional understandings of disadvantage, is integral to answering questions of effectiveness, identity change and ultimately, desistance.

"How Change Might Happen": Re-entry and Desistance

I will now consider the evidence on how education can contribute to desistance journeys in the community post-prison. In order to fully evaluate this literature, it is important to define desistance and re-entry. "Offender re-entry is the process of leaving an institution of incarceration and re-joining conventional society" (Anderson et al., 2018, p. 3). Whether re-entering the community after serving a prison sentence only once or multiple times, many prison leavers negotiate a complex set of issues which can impact the success of their reintegration into society (Nugent, & Schinkel, 2016) and their 'desistance' journey. These barriers include substance misuse (Skjærvø et al., 2021) and lack of suitable housing (Roman & Travis, 2004) as well as coming from and returning to socioeconomically deprived neighbourhoods (Morenoff & Harding, 2014). Accessing services as early as possible on re-entry, especially in the first 72 hours after leaving prison (Cook & Haynes, 2021), is crucial to the reduction of reoffending rates, which stand

¹ In England and Wales, prisons are categorised according to risk of escape or harm to the public. A is the highest risk category, D is the lowest and often has less restrictions to prisoner movement. See [Your A-D guide on prison categories](#)

at 53.9% for adults released from custodial sentences of less than 12 months in England and Wales (MoJ, 2023). It has been argued, however, that recidivism rates offer a narrow understanding of prison leavers' journeys as they focus solely on whether an individual reoffends (MacKenzie, 2020). A focus on desistance, instead, offers a deeper understanding of the complex processes involved in moving away from crime, as it gives an account of the barriers and challenges over a sustained period of time, post-release from prison (Maruna, 2001a).

Much of the criminological literature theorises the desistance journey in terms of two interrelated aspects. Ontogenetic factors relate to the process of maturation, whereby offenders are less likely to commit crime as they age (Rocque, 2015) whereas sociogenic reasons for desistance play out through informal social controls such as getting married, finding employment or becoming a parent (Laub & Sampson, 2001). The two theories of desistance are interrelated; criminal career researchers have found that the time when crime or delinquency reduces – usually mid-twenties – coincides with the time when young people are more likely get married, have children and find employment.(Gadd & Farrall, 2004). These 'social bonds' engage people in informal networks of obligation and control which support a move away from crime (Gadd & Farrall, 2004). Gadd and Farrall (2004) critique criminal career research for the lack of interpretation regarding the meaning of relationships with social institutions and argue that "much criminal careers research proceeds as if the meaning of these all-important social relationships can be simply read off from evidence of their presence" (p. 127). They argue that one exception in criminal career research is the work of Shadd Maruna (1999; 2001a), who disentangles the subjective meanings that desisters (and persisters) ascribe to the events of their lives and the social relationships that hold value for them.

In the landmark study on desistance, *Making Good*, Maruna (2001) offers a critique to traditional criminological understandings of desistance and suggests that what is missing is an understanding of the subjectivity and agency of the individual. Through life narrative enquiry, Maruna compares the self-narratives of two groups of men; persistent offenders, and desisting prison leavers. Moving beyond social bonds or structural factors, Maruna explores their research participants' self-narratives and "how they choose to frame the events of their lives" (p. 2). They found that identity development and life story narration are closely linked, with both groups attempting to reconcile past mistakes with present and future actions – many desisters attempt to 'make good' and give back to society. They found that persisters of crime attributed the beginnings of their criminal trajectories to their difficult childhoods, and their narratives were often chaotic, difficult to

follow and emphasised that they were the victims of their own lives. The desisters, on the other hand, argued that their unpleasant pasts helped them to eventually 'make good' from their difficult beginnings, and give back to society rather than taking away. By following a "redemption script" they were able to give back to society through generative acts, and in some instances act as a role model to youths.

Although agency and an individual's will are central to the desistance journey, many desistance researchers focus on the stigma and alienation that individuals face in their day-to-day lives post-release from prison and argue that agency is relational. Bottoms & Shapland (2011) comment:

But this journey, we cannot emphasize strongly enough, is not undertaken in a social vacuum. The offender may be starting out on an agentically driven journey towards desistance – but societal actors (including criminal justice personnel and some potential employers) are likely still to be seeing him or her as an offender. (p. 277)

In later studies, although Maruna (2011) continues to emphasise the importance of identity in the desistance process, they emphasise the relational nature of desistance, where identity reformulation is dependent on societal acceptance. They argue that "successful reintegration is a two-way process, requiring both effort on the part of the former prisoner (e.g. desistance, repentance), but also on the part of some wider community (e.g. forgiveness, acceptance)" (Maruna, 2011, p. 13). In discussing the barriers that prison leavers experience, they propose that, in contrast to the public rituals of incarceration and its lead-up (arrest, courtroom drama etc.), the process of re-entry and desistance has very few public ritual or rites of passage, and instead ex-offenders are met with both stigma and alienation. Maruna suggests that re-entry rituals which support integration should be considered during the formulation of policies to support successful desistance journeys and reduce the stigma experienced by ex-offenders.

Nugent and Schinkel (2016) also suggest that the desistance journey moves beyond 'act desistance', where an individual stops offending, and that identity and 'relational desistance' are equally central to the cessation of committing crime. 'Identity desistance' involves the internalisation of a non-offender identity (e.g. 'father' or 'student') and relational desistance depends on the recognition of a genuine change in status by others. Their study on the 'pains of desistance' found that identity desistance can be derailed by a lack of acceptance by others in non-offender contexts. Act desistance, without successful identity desistance due to an absence of relational desistance, can lead to a lonely existence for prison leavers – many return to crime, failing in their desistance

journey. Their study found that most participants were “becoming increasingly isolated, lonely, lacking in hope and losing sight of a happy ending” (Nugent, & Schinkel, 2016, p. 581).

Best et al. (2017; 2024) illustrate the importance of the social dynamic in both recovery from addiction and desistance from crime. This body of research emphasises the interconnectedness of the recovery model for people addicted to alcohol and drugs, and theories on desistance from crime, highlighting the importance of the social dynamic in systemic change and recovery (Best et al., 2017; 2024). As detailed earlier in this chapter, many people in prison experience drug use during early adolescence and become addicted as young adults. Cycles of offending and addiction are closely related, and the stigma, social exclusion and pathologisation individuals experience is often comparable, including the need to convince others that they have really changed in the recovery/desistance period of their journey (Braithwaite, 1989). Best et al. (2024) argue that sustained desistance and addiction recovery share basic characteristics: “identity transition, social network support, psychological changes and active engagement in and reintegration with communities ... seen as occurring within a staged process for desistance from offending” (p. 6).

Participants’ identity changes are embedded within a network of support in a community setting and through “active participation in community life and a phased journey of personal transformation” (Best et. al, 2024, p. 23). Maruna (2001) argues that the community setting is intrinsic to identity change as the belief from others is integral and central to self-efficacy. They further argue that the visibility of redemptive behaviours is one of the drivers of engagement with activities that give back, as others are able to witness changed behaviour and offer acceptance (Maruna, 2001). Lastly, desistance and recovery should move away from a deficit model to a strengths-based model. Stressing relational rather than the individual aspects, and strengths rather than deficits, Best and Coleman (2019) argue, “recovery and desistance should both be conceptualised as strengths-based, community-focused and relational in character. In many of the theories underpinning both bodies of work, relationships are central to our understanding of how change might happen” (p. 1). The desistance literature demonstrates the centrality of identity transformation and how relations with others are integral to successful desistance processes. The next section centres on how education features in this process, and I map the further complex barriers that can exist in this journey.

“Hooks for Change”: Desistance and Education

The relational dynamic in a person's desistance journey is integral to success, and the research discussed in this section suggests that education can be a meaningful activity to support those who wish to move away from crime and develop alternative peer groups, aspirations and goals in the community after release. Although most literature on the nexus between desistance and education focuses on education in prison, 'the inside-student', there are some studies which explore the impact and relationship between desistance and education in the community (Jones & Jones, 2021). Educational provision in the community is largely an extension of what is offered in prison. Support organisations offer courses for prison leavers (and other marginalised groups) in the community which mirror the offering in prison (PET, 2025), typically English and maths, a range of vocational courses, employability workshops. A minority of prison leavers engage in HE upon release, sometimes as a continuation from their studies in prison. Most insights are offered in relation to HE and vocational courses, and the struggles and successes in the community post-release.

Runnell (2017) argues that those who engage in HE are less likely to reoffend than those who engage in vocational courses. Their study charts the progress of 34 prisoners who undertook HE courses in prison, and maps their educational trajectories on release. Runnell's research participants considered, "post release enrolment in HE as a "hook for change" given that they reportedly felt more confident and purposeful in their decisions to abandon crime after being accepted into the program" (p. 902). Participants' non-criminal pathways post-release were "emboldened" by their educational trajectories and they cited the HE programme as a "medium for inspiration and change", offering a "glimmer of hope" (p. 904). Many of the participants mentioned returning to deprived neighbourhoods as the main barrier to completing their courses of education, and suggested that former crime networks and subcultures negatively influenced their ability to stay focused on studying. Stigma or fear of stigma was also cited as a barrier to assimilating into society. Runnell states that "formerly incarcerated individuals who perceive or experience social stigma post-release are at risk of resorting back to familiar modes of criminality as a quick way to cope with the resulting frustrations" (p. 909). A source of support for the cohort, however, was a dedicated group for prison leavers navigating HE and weekly meetings were a way for participants to share their struggles, discuss the stigma they encountered and also the successes of their educational journeys post-release. She argues that "participants felt a sense of comfort and acceptance in the presence of other group members. These circumstances compelled them to push beyond social stigma and other barriers and prove their willingness and ability to engage in college-level courses" (p. 911). Runnell describes

the meetings and support processes of the group as rituals of re-entry that helped to maintain educational pathways through HE and out of crime.

Fostering a sense of belonging amongst ostracised groups is paramount in supporting desistance journeys; Jones and Jones (2021) argue that HE can be both an inhibitor and enabler of this process. Jones and Jones's study sought to examine the challenges prison leavers face when engaging with HE post-release, including exploring the challenges, stigma, aspirations and successes through a pictorial narrative methodology. Using MacNeill's (2012) rubric for desistance, Jones and Jones argue that interconnected dimensions of transformation are needed for navigating away from crime: the personal dimension, which relates to individual agency, values and identities; the social dimension, which relates to a positive and expanded social network; the judicial dimension, which relates to de-labelling of offenders in terms of housing, employability etc.; and the moral/political dimension, which relates to integration and acceptance from all levels of society, argued to be the most significant hurdle to navigate. (p. 10).

In Jones and Jones's (2021) participatory action research study, respondents who were navigating life in the community post-prison reported the most significant barriers upon entering HE were ongoing issues with mental health and substance misuse. Many had experienced significant trauma both in their childhoods and adult lives and were continuing to grapple with issues post-release. Jones and Jones found that although universities have sought to be inclusive spaces with mental health services for all students, the facilities were often under-resourced and did not cater for people with complex needs. Further primary challenges were connected with structural disadvantage; having a safe place to live, connecting with family and having access to secure income through employment were the source of both challenges and aspirations. To achieve security and stability were the overriding challenges to be navigated, and following this, the participants were able to consider education in the community. Although education post-release was perceived as aspirational, nearly all the participants were concerned about stigma, the university not being a place for people with problems as well as being haunted by their educational pasts and experiences of exclusion. Despite these barriers, many respondents also commented that HE could offer a place to develop critical thinking skills, new positive networks and to explore opportunities for gainful employment in the future.

There is less literature on the challenges and successes of engaging with vocational education and employability support in the community upon release. Most studies reference employability-based education in prison and how this impacts recidivism on release (Davis, 2013; Nally et al., 2012). Employment and a stable income is important

to prison leavers' post release trajectories and sense of security while navigating life in the community. However, Costelloe & Warner (2014) argue that wider opportunities should be offered to people upon release from prison beyond employability and vocational education; they reason that the explanations for many individuals' incarceration are far more complex and deep-rooted than simply being unemployed.

In sum, this section has argued that the nexus between desistance and education is a complex one and is a process, not a single event. Re-entry into the community is a challenging time for desisters and while education can offer bridges to building more prosocial identities, it can also pose difficulties when engaging in educational spaces due to ongoing structural disadvantage, stigma and exclusion. Desistance is not a unitary act, rather a relational endeavour, and community networks and support are integral to a successful move away from crime. Education can be a crucial part of identity transformation as well as an integral part of the desistance journey.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have mapped the multiple barriers, constraints and difficulties prison leavers experience when attempting to participate in education. Prison leavers are overwhelmingly male, from disadvantaged settings, significantly more likely to experience LDDs and originate from classed and racialised backgrounds. Many have left school early or they have been excluded. A review of the pertinent literature reveals that minoritised and racialised groups within schools are subject to more intensive surveillance, targeting by teachers, isolation and exclusion, and are therefore more vulnerable to being funnelled into the justice system. Experiences of prison education highlight significant barriers to participation due to funding cuts and I have revealed how austerity measures have curtailed opportunities to develop capabilities in and through education in prison. Moreover, debates suggest current employment-based education provision in prisons is not supportive of desistance aims, and alternative models suggest that education should be part of the processes of identity change, building community relations and supporting the redemptive signifiers of desistance.

The evidence discussed above shines a light on the complex journeys men experience as they attempt to engage (or re-engage) with education before, during and after prison and the constraints they experience are complex, multiple and interlocking. I have situated the many barriers and constraints within contemporary criminological and sociological debates, and have unpacked how education is positioned within these frameworks. The shaping of identity has emerged as a central theme, and I have

endeavoured to capture how the mechanisms of schooling, the politics of prison education and the precarity of the relational processes of desistance feature in these subjective processes. If identity is at the centre of both the barriers and concurrently the keys to transformation for men in the justice system, then I argue that a deeper focus of inquiry must unpack the intersectional, interlocking dimensions of disadvantage, including an analysis of gender subjectivity. Turning toward an explicit focus on the gendered nature of educational experiences and of imprisonment, Chapter Three explores more deeply the gendered subjectivities of men who engage with or avoid education before, during and after prison.

Chapter Three: Problem boys? Gender and Education in Prison Leavers' Journeys

Introduction

This chapter explores a wider research literature that fosters an understanding of the relationship between gender and education and draws out the implications for this study in terms of its relevance to the educational experiences of prison leavers. I begin with a discussion on gender and achievement and explanations for marginalised boys' disengagement and struggles within the classroom. Insights from empirical studies also map the gendered and hierarchical nature of schooling, the homosocial and heteronormative peer dynamic, attitudes of teachers, the role of violence and how identity markers intersect to exacerbate disadvantage, and shape a tough, resistant masculine subjectivities in adolescence. I also discuss the literature which explores gender performativity in the carceral space, and how masculine identities play a central role in determining how men navigate prison and how education features in these debates. A focus on the role and functions of violence focuses on further discussion of gendered performances in prison, and debates around the role of trauma in the genesis of violent behaviours. Finally, this chapter will close with a discussion on how gender features in desistance journeys, analysing how traditional masculine roles can support non-offender identities.

“Problem Boys”: Contextualising Boys' Underachievement and the Shaping of Masculine Subjectivity

Literature on the school-to-prison-pipeline has offered an understanding of the struggles marginalised boys' experience in the classroom, focussing on the mechanisms of schooling and how labelling, stigma and attitudes of teachers can be detrimental to the shaping of fledgling learner subjectivities. This section will explore how marginalised boys' underachievement has been understood within debates on gender and education and how these studies can offer further insight into prisoners' educational pasts.

Beginning with the moral panic that arose from boys' underachievement in the 1990s, I begin by offering a historical context to debates on gender and achievement in the UK. In the late 1990s, girls began outperforming boys academically (Epstein, 1998). This led to strong public, academic and media reactions and the 'failing boys' discourse was born (Jackson, 1998). Feminist interventions designed to support equality for girls in schooling were blamed for boys' underachievement. Positing a zero-sum game, girls' educational supremacy has been the overriding accusation of boys' apparent failure

(Ringrose, 2013). Feminist commentators cautioned against simplistic interpretations and monolithic understandings of boys' apparent blanket underachievement and the moral panic that has resulted from limited explanations offered to understand the disparities (Epstein, 1998). As Epstein discusses, "the blame for boys relative lack of success was attributed not to something intrinsic to, or culturally produced in, boys, but on the contrary, to the feminine culture of primary schools..." (p. 129).

Boys' underachievement has also been understood within the so-called 'crisis of masculinity' (Whitehead & Barrett, 2001) debate, where enduring underachievement, particularly of White working-class boys, is symptomatic of wider issues affecting boys and men in modern society, ranging from claims of increasingly feminised work environments in working-class sectors, especially the service industry (McDowell, 2020), high suicide rates, poor health outcomes and higher likelihood of being the perpetrator and victim of street violence (Hearn, 2010). Roberts (2014) has refuted that there is a crisis of masculinity (in education and beyond) and instead suggests that a nuanced, intersectional approach to understanding the structural issues at play in gendered work, schooling and forging of identities is needed. Empirical research must understand the local and structural demands on the issues facing young people, and how gender is entangled in these considerations of advantage and disadvantage. Epstein and colleagues' (1998) comment from the late 1990s is still valid in 2025: "while there are many boys who are not doing well at schools, there are many others who are doing very well indeed" (p. 10). The focus should be on *which* boys, and *which* girls are achieving and underachieving, and of those who are failing in terms of traditional notions of achievement. We must examine the complex mix of relations, hierarchies and power imbalances in schooling to understand the key issues (Jackson, 1998). Reviewing the educational achievement tables in 2021, it is clear that boys from high income households, especially from British Asian backgrounds are doing far better than girls from White British and Black Caribbean working-class backgrounds, for example (Strand, 2021). Analysis of intersecting inequalities of disadvantage must be understood within discourses of gender, class, race and (dis)ability to gain a full picture of the barriers experienced by certain groups of boys (and girls) who struggle to achieve, or go through disengagement from formative education (Archer et al., 2007; Francis, 2006; Jackson & Dempster, 2009).

Beginning with a close reading of empirical studies which focus on gender, there is a wealth of empirical research that explores the relationship between masculinities and schooling. The UK literature which explores gender identity in schooling offers theoretically rich insights from masculinities theory (Connell, 2005), poststructuralist feminist analysis

(Francis & Skelton, 2001) and psychoanalysis (Frosh et al., 2000) as well as a large body of work from the sociology of education that has charted inequalities in education for decades (Ball & Stephen, 2013; Reay, 2018). Focusing on the role of masculinities in the shaping of learner identities and the inequality of educational capabilities, the following review of the pertinent literature seeks to deconstruct the discourse surrounding the ‘failing boys’ metanarrative as well as exploring notions of resistance or ‘protest masculinity’ (Willis, 1978). Connell (2005) argues that schools are arenas for masculine identity construction, where for marginalised men, “schooling is far from being an empowering experience. They encounter school authority as an alien power and start to define their masculinity against it” (p. 100). Ingram & Waller (2014) argue that middle-class boys, on the other hand, perform their masculine identities in educational spaces by “throwing weight around intellectually” (p. 45), being sure to present natural intelligence and cleverness rather than working hard, which is pathologised as feminine or the subordinate masculine Other. Boys from all backgrounds attempt to move away from the pathologised Other of the ‘boffin’ (Francis, 2009), the ‘swot’ (Connell, 1989) or the ‘academic achievers’ (Mac An Ghaill, 1994) in schooling, and tropes of the ‘class clown’, the child that disrupts in order to entertain peers, continue to endure.

Seminal texts such as Willis’s (1978) *Learning to Labour* have explored the importance of classed and gendered trajectories in working-class boys’ educational outcomes, and the role of the peer dynamic in boys from all backgrounds – needing to ‘fit in’ through the assertion of hegemonic masculine ideals. As Maguire (2021) argues, working-class gender identities can be performed through a discourse of dominance and aggression, and “any difference is perceived as weakness and makes one a target for ridicule – and a macho image, based on rebellion against school authority and a belief that schoolwork is for “wimps” and effeminate boys” (p. 42). Although Connell critiques Willis’s focus on the school-to-work transition as limiting, and suggests wider structures are at play in determining the fate of his participants, they credit Willis and other theorists of the time as changing the narrative on youth subcultures, many of which support an understanding of the STPP and the school as a site of social struggle, particularly in terms of class and gender relations.

Boys who grow up on the margins can perform identities that are a “response to powerlessness, a claim to the gendered position of power, a pressured exaggeration ... of masculine conventions” (Connell, 2005, p. 111). The institution of school is a place where working-class boys rally against middle-class values of conformity and challenge power hierarchies by performing protest masculinities. Mac An Ghaill (2003) found that macho

and anti-authority sentiment was expressed through group-based identities rather than individualistic behaviours, and those who achieved academically continued to be pathologised and were rendered social outcasts. Masculine identities that resist authority have significant cultural capital; Francis (2009) argues that “laddish performances of masculinity attract the highest social status in state schooling environments” (p. 646). Popular boys must maintain an identity position that is resistant to diligence, classwork, homework and achievement, and instead assume a position that is the opposite of the ‘swot’ or ‘teacher’s pet’, in order to maintain their social standing amongst peers.

Evan’s (2006) study further explores the class-based identities of boys in the school space and how disruptive behaviours are “rendered pathological while the formation of the disruptive boys’ peer group, as a social phenomenon is never considered” (p. 83). Evans argues that group identities cannot be divorced from classroom-based practices which expect children to show restraint of their natural desire to play and instead are expected to be compliant, stationary and able to concentrate for extended periods of time. Disruptive children become ‘problem children’ and are eventually labelled in terms of Special Educational Needs (SEN), especially as having emotional or behavioural problems. This has a huge impact on achievement. Evans argues that their working-class participant, *Tom*, falls further and further behind as his learning difficulties are not addressed and he continues to struggle in the mainstream classroom setting as a disruptive force bound up in a problem narrative.

Rey’s (2018) study on working-class experiences of education in the neoliberal and middle-class space of the school, explains how children can be demonised, pathologised and blamed for their lack of success. They argue “dominant discourses” of the school render the “working-classes as inadequate, failing learners” (Reay, 2018, p. 76). Archer’s (2008) trichotomy is a mapping device which charts how Other/pathologised pupils are categorised by schooling mechanisms along racial lines, highlighting how stereotypical characteristics being ascribed on the basis of race, ability and behaviours are borne out in the space of the classroom. Gillborn (and colleagues) in a range of studies further evidences that Black and ethnic minority students are disadvantaged by attainment, ability grouping, curriculum and behavioural policies (Gillborn, 2019; Gillborn et al., 2017; Gillborn & Kirton, 2000).

Some researchers have focused on the social factors that can influence boys’ achievement. Francis’s (2006) work, for example, further highlights how the ‘failing boys’ narrative developed into the ‘problem boys’ discourse. Francis argues that blaming teachers for boys’ academic failures feeds into the ‘poor boys’ discourse – stemming from

the crisis of masculinities debates, teachers (often female) are blamed for working-class boys' poor learning outcomes, and, as Evans (2006) suggests above, the peer dynamic is left unexplored. 'Poor boys' who are disruptive in class become 'at-risk' boys and are demonised for taking up teacher time, class resources and are positioned as inadequate and irresponsible. Francis (2006) remarks that "social constructions of gender which locate diligence, obedience and application in the feminine and resistance, rebellion and hedonism in the masculine ... have a substantive contribution to play in the comparative underachievement of some groups of boys" (p. 196).

Francis (2006) argues that it is the social structures that dictate boys' behaviours that should be challenged, not the pathologising of individual children, who are often from disadvantaged backgrounds and come from families who are not confident in navigating the neoliberal, middle-class systems of schooling. These boys are posited as "architects of their own failure" (Francis, 2006, p. 195) and elicit very little sympathy for their downfall. Within this body of work, it is important to note that working-class boys are not a homogeneous group and examples of educational motivation and success are documented, as well as the many barriers they experience in achieving educational goals (Reay, 2002).

Turning to an application of poststructuralist feminist analysis in educational spaces, Youdell (2006) unpicks the inequalities learners face in the school space, and how identities are pathologised through the everyday practices of schooling. They argue in *Impossible Bodies, Impossible selves: Exclusions and Student subjectivities*, that using ethnographic methodologies and poststructuralist insights "help[s] us to untangle how particular students come to occupy particular subject positions; how particular inequalities come about; and how these come to appear so abiding, or even natural" (Youdell, 2006, p. 76).

Youdell (2006) argues that learner identities are influenced by the "normalising judgements" (p. 36) of gendered school discourses and that learners only become 'intelligible' or acceptable by performing gendered discursive practices 'correctly'. Learners who are subjected to routine exclusionary practices, as their behaviours do not align with acceptable school practices, become alienated in the school space and become 'impossible learners' in 'impossible bodies' (p. 1).

Intersectional understandings of learner identities are centred in Youdell's (2006) analysis and their typologies of learner identities, in particular 'impossible learners', 'acceptable/unacceptable learners' and 'ideal learners' are useful in understanding how the performance of gender subjectivities (dis)advantages boys navigating the social and

institutional world of school. Discourses of (dis)ability, race and social class coalesce to shape gender subjectivities that are antithetical to hegemonic school discourses; in order to become intelligible, boys embody characteristics that enable recognition through resistance or disruption. Youdell invites theorising on boys who “cite and constitute a particular sub-cultural masculinity that is irreverent to school norms” (p. 170), and offers a theoretical space in which to understand the impossibility of certain bodies and identities engaging and participating in educational processes. Youdell also comments,

it is still frequently the case that a single category is placed at the centre of analysis, in the current context this is particularly the case in relation to boys’ ‘under-achievement’ where there is a reluctance to ask ‘Which boys and which girls?’. (p. 28)

This section has contextualised boys’ underachievement further and has discussed the discursive practices of schooling through a gendered lens. I have discussed the literature on gender and achievement, citing how gendered subjectivities are constituted through peer group dynamics, the normalising judgements of school discourses and intersectional understandings of identity which encompass the intersection of gender with race, class and (dis)ability of minoritised students. These wider debates have cast light on the gendered implications of prison leavers’ schooling experiences, which at the time of writing, is entirely neglected in the prison education literature. The next section will offer insights on the prison as a site of learning, and the gendered nature of the barriers and challenges that men who experience prison encounter in re-engaging with education in adulthood, and importantly, the central role that violence plays in disrupting educational trajectories.

Prison Masculinities, Education and Violence

The intersection between imprisonment, violence and education remains under-researched. However, literature which discusses prison masculinities and violence offers a lens through which to begin to examine how homosocial relations influence behaviours in educational spaces in the prison context. In Joe Sims earlier work “Tougher than the rest? Men in Prison” (1994), they argue that violence is a central part of the social fabric of prison life and should not be understood as “a pathological manifestation of abnormal otherness but as part of the normal routine which is sustained and legitimated by the wider culture of masculinity” (pg. 105). Pemberton (2013) argues that Connell’s (2005) seminal work on hegemonic masculinities theory (see Chapter Four) is particularly useful for understanding prison systems and the role of violence. Pemberton argues that Connell’s focus on the shaping of masculinities within an institutional context emphasises that a

performance of gender is bound up within the political economy of an institution, and supports the construct of a normative understanding of masculine behaviours, values and identities. They go onto argue that a failure to meet these norms results in subordinated prisoners holding “low status” and becoming “targets for sexual assault” (Pemberton, 2013, p. 168). Pemberton elaborates that “norms within prisons are partially shaped by the views and behaviour of guards, staff, and inmates” (p. 168). Maguire (2019) argues that hegemonic masculine ideals and subsequent normative behaviours in adult male prisons may be associated with “respectable prison masculinities” (p. 2) including a persona of toughness, stoicism, heteronormativity, the willingness to use violence (especially in self-defence) and a revulsion towards femininity, homosexuality and vulnerability. Masculine vulnerability and its relationship to violence in carceral spaces is drawn upon by numerous masculinities scholars and will be drawn on throughout the following sections (Bengtsson, 2016; Evans & Wallace, 2008; Gooch, 2019; Phillips, 2012).

In young offender institutions, ‘hypermasculine’ behaviours involve violence, dominance and aggression (Bengtsson, 2016). These behaviours are deemed an integral part of the environment and constitute normative behaviour for those occupying hegemonic masculine roles (Gooch, 2019). Those who do not successfully emulate hegemonic ideals are deemed contemptible and their subordinate role in the masculine hierarchy serves to legitimise the violence against them (Murray, 2020). Gooch explains, “it was the femininity, weakness and homosexuality of the ‘meeks’, ‘fraggles’, ‘faggots’ and ‘nonces’ that made them contemptible to others, disqualifying them from the status as a ‘real man’” (p. 70). Men furthest away from masculine hegemony in the carceral space may perform subordinate masculinities, embodying vulnerability and practicing destructive behaviours such as self-harm and uncontrolled violence as well as social withdrawal from prison life (Jewkes, 2005; Murray, 2020). Connell (2005) states that masculinities are contextual and shifting and violence in particular is not necessarily the mark of masculine power. Jewkes (2005) suggests prisoners who are too eager to fight or engage in unpredictable violence are deemed “wannabe gangsters” (p. 52) and lacking in self-control. Maguire (2019a) further argues that self-defence or “measured violence” (p. 5), for example retribution for an unpaid debt or for informing on another prisoner, is respected, whereas uncontrollable anger and aggressiveness is looked down upon and deemed as a subordinate hypermasculine behaviour.

Drawing on Goffman (1961) and their work on total institutions, de Viggiani (2023) argues that men navigate vulnerabilities in prison by negotiating “front management strategies” providing “legitimate social attire for coping with prison life” (p. 273). Stoicism

and self-control are integral to surviving adult prison life and fitting in, described in some studies as projecting an image of toughness, or 'wearing a mask' to hide deeper vulnerabilities (De Viggiani, 2012). Vulnerability in the form of public displays of emotion, or the opposite – withdrawal and avoiding prison social life entirely – suggests prisoners are unable to cope with their sentences (Murray, 2020). Additionally, Karp (2010) suggests vulnerability "provides an opening for exploitation or domination" (p. 78). Ricciardelli and colleagues' (2015) study suggests that the careful negotiation of a tough, controlled outward persona is essential to ensure individuals' safety and that "he who appears the least physically, emotionally and legally vulnerable and is best able to manage the uncertainty of prison life holds the most empowered position in relation to other prisoners" (p. 492).

Maguire's (2019) research discusses how the Vulnerable Persons' Unit (VPU) is the ultimate pathologising sign within the adult male prison. The VPU is a protected part of adult male prisons where those deemed at risk – especially informants and sex offenders who have violated the prison code (Sabo et al., 2001) – are housed for their own protection. Vulnerability is deemed as feminine, effeminate and weak so to ensure survival, vulnerability must be quashed. As one of Evans and Wallace's (2008) respondents in their qualitative study exploring the masculinities of men in prison suggested, "life is a battle in which constant vigilance is required to avoid being crushed and humiliated. One way of losing that battle is to show emotion" (p. 496). This strategy can be seen as an example of the doomed project of emulating hegemonic masculinity. Avoiding vulnerability results in prisoners not receiving emotional support and instead self-medicating with illegal drugs, self-harming or in extreme circumstances taking their own lives. Self-harm and suicide rates in prisons are exceptionally high compared to the rest of the population (Fazel et al., 2017) as discussed in chapter one.

How do these beliefs, identities and practices, which revolve around masculinities and violence, relate specifically to education in the carceral space? Echoing Sims (1994) point on the absence of gendered theorising of prisoners as men, I argue in this section that *prison learners* have also been overlooked as gendered beings and as people with complex identities which will influence their educational engagement and journeys. Firstly, Crewe et al. (2014) argue that the space of the prison is emotionally diverse and has a "distinctive kind of emotional geography" (p. 56). Crewe describes "emotion zones" (p. 57) which capture different types of relations between prisoners where behaviours depart from the hypermasculine displays of aggression and violence often described in the literature. One of these zones has been described as the prison education department. In some

classrooms, men in prison could drop their masks, perform different types of identities such as being a 'student', express care for each other and disclose personal details – this activity would be ill-advised on the wings. In Nichols (2021) own teaching practice in prisons, they found that education brought different types of prisoners together and supported a move away from hegemonic displays of masculinity. They argue,

While appearing tough in prison can provide a way for men to cope during their time inside, education (as both an activity and a physical space) allows them to present the softer, or more emotionally engaged side of their personality without the risk that this can carry in other areas of the prison.
(Nichols, 2021, p. 82)

Nichols (2021) work is one of the few studies which builds upon the relationship between masculinities and education in the carceral space. They reflect on how a lack of educational ability can result in men in prison performing tough masculinities to hide educational vulnerabilities. She also suggests student identities are perceived as feminine and manual labour, and the gym are seen as more traditionally masculine pursuits in prison. Nichols also notes that education can be an important part of the process of developing a new "mask" which inside the prison "may be taken off when leaving the education department" (p. 82). In their US study, Key & May (2020) also argue that "education functions as a means of resistance to hegemonic masculinity" (p. 2) and that walking through the classroom door is an act of defiance. His ethnographic study suggests that the prison classroom is a space (Giordano et al., 2002) that allows students to be vulnerable and avoid exploitation (Key & May, 2020). Key & May's study scrutinises the role of the prison officer who represents a barrier to prison students' engagement and dehumanises them by using their prison numbers and treating them as a security threat rather than students.

Carberry (2017) further argues that the classroom experience for male prisoners can be an emotional one and that their behaviour in the classroom is inextricably linked to the "historical baggage" (p. 87) of their childhoods, and compounded by the composite environment of masculine code of prison life. Carberry suggests that "challenges exist regarding issues of trust, intimacy and emotional development" (p. 87) and that these are inextricably connected with "concepts of the masculine self and masculine identity" (p. 112). Although the exposure of vulnerabilities can be both triggering and restorative for those with psychological needs such as attachment disorder, Carberry argues that a skilled facilitator who is cognizant of the demands on prisoners can support them to "safely reflect, examine and potentially transform their learning experiences and

thus their sense of self.” (p. 82). Nichols (2021) also argues that engaging in prison education can reduce the deprivations of imprisonment and support an increase in confidence. After poor experiences of schooling, it can build confidence and foster identity transformation, from offender to student, which holds significance for desistance journeys.

This section has begun to link the shaping of gender subjectivity in the educational spaces of the prison and how hegemonic masculine hierarchies influence educational environments and engagement. Education can reduce the pains of imprisonment by acting as a way to pass the time, but it can also promote further performances of hegemonic masculinity by those who have educational issues and are struggling to engage. Violence represents one way through which to perform this type of masculinity among prisoners. The following section explores the functions of violence in marginalised men’s lives, and how it can impact educational trajectories.

The genesis and functions of violence in prisons

Understanding the role and genesis of violence in the lives of prison leavers is an important part of the puzzle of scrutinising how gendered subjectivities and identities can impact educational capabilities through prison leavers’ life courses. The study of violent behaviours is a common feature of the exploration of criminal men’s lives and the literature pertaining to masculinities, crime and imprisonment. Relevant studies include analysis of the functions, roles and vulnerabilities connected to the gendered phenomenon of male violence (Berggren & Gottzén, 2023; Heber, 2017; Toch, 1998; Toch & Kupers, 2007) as well as theorisation on the genesis of violent behaviours (Ellis, 2016; Gadd & Jefferson, 2007; Laws, 2019).

Violence against the person accounts for the most common criminal offence in England and Wales with 21,919 offences being committed in the year ending December 2023 (Justice Data, 2024). Young men are far more likely to be the perpetrators and victims of most types of violence apart from Interpersonal Partner Violence (IPV), where female victims far outnumber male victims (Crime Survey for England and Wales [CSEW] from the Office for National Statistics, 2023). Prison violence has increased exponentially in recent years (HM Prison and Probation Service [HMPPS] - Prisons Data, 2024) and Ismail (2019) has argued that austerity measures since 2010 have directly impacted staffing levels and prisoner safety. Gooch and Treadwell (2022) have also argued that the rapid increase in prison violence has been exacerbated by the drastic reduction of funds to prison estates. They highlight how the use of increased prisoner peer support to fill the staffing gap created a “decline in social and moral order” (Gooch and Treadwell, 2022, p.

1232) and contributed to increasing levels of violence. One study has suggested that engagement with education can reduce prison violence (McGuire, 2018) whereas an increase in prison violence, often committed by the most disengaged members of the prison population, can adversely impact educational outcomes (Institute for Government, 2019). According to a report by the Institute for Government (2019), during the peak of the prison violence in England and Wales and under austerity measures, qualifications attained by learners within prisons were at an all-time low.

Hearn et al. (2022) assert that the range of studies on violence is “immense” (p. 683) and research has used wide-ranging theoretical and methodological frames to understand patterns and relationships in the proliferation of violence. This section focuses chiefly on structural and poststructuralist understandings of boys’ and men’s violence and how they are performed in educational spaces. In Connell’s (2002) early work, *On Hegemonic Masculinity and Violence*, they argue that narrow definitions of men’s violence, such as “face-to-face fighting between individual men” (p. 93), overlook how violent practices have a complex relationship with institutional power, stressing that diverse forms of violence exist including interpersonal, collective and structural. Ellis (2016) argues that masculinities theory offers an opportunity for “understanding violent criminality, which can represent a means to exert dominance and power over others” (p. 124). Connell argues that by exploring how violence relates to hegemonic masculinities – principally by wielding social power and domination over women, children and subordinate men – is central to understanding the function behind men’s violent behaviours and identities in a range of social spaces (see also Kimmel et al., 2005). The marker of a convincing emulation of hegemonic masculinity is the successful claim to authority and is often underpinned by violence (Connell, 2005). Drawing on Connell’s work, Messerschmitt’s (2005) study on adolescence, masculinity and violence propounds that the construction of a young man’s masculinity is influenced by the behaviours of adult father figures in the home, and has consequences in the school space and amongst peer groups. They argue that a construction of hegemonic male power was understood by their participants as “control of others, and the use of physical violence to solve inter-personal problems” (Messerschmidt, 2005, p. 297). These “family values” of routine, everyday violence in the home fostered a reproduction of violent masculinity.

A range of further studies have discussed the use of violence in constructing heteronormative and “intelligible masculinities” (Ringrose & Renold, 2010, p. 579) in schooling (Archer et al., 2010; Bhana, 2020; Bhana & Mayeza, 2016; Frosh, 2002; Haywood & Mac An Ghail, 2013; Mac an Ghail, 1996). These studies lean on a feminist

poststructuralist, psychosocial approach but also incorporate elements of a masculinities frame. In a study exploring adolescent boys' navigation of risk, violence and masculinity in a variety of school and community settings in an urban neighbourhood, Parkes and Connelly (2013) found that violence was used as a resource by participants to position themselves within popular discourses, especially within the school setting. The chief signifier of being popular was performing a 'hard' masculinity through "the use of violence, breaking school rules and through denigrating weaker ones" (Parkes & Conolly, 2013, p. 99). In Ringrose & Renold's study on bullying, they scrutinise the regulatory and institutional discourses of gender, violence and bullying in schools. They unpack how particular subjectivities are constituted through pathologising institutional processes and how these discourses are excluded when heteronormative hierarchies are contested. Boys and girls navigate the rigid and often binary heteronormative confines of schooling through conflicted and contested gendered performances of friendship and bullying, school compliance and peer-related violence, and struggle to assert agency in the "bully and anti-bully discourse" (Ringrose & Renold, 2010, p. 591). These studies offer a compelling feminist poststructuralist framing of how gender and violence play out in social spaces and how these ideas can enrich and challenge a masculinities framing of performativity (Beasley, 2019). These theoretical strands are currently missing in the literature on violence in criminal men's lives and the field lacks an account of how subjectivity, gender, agency and violence interact in social, educational sites. My study aims to address this gap in the literature and offer analysis through this important framework.

Psychosocial criminologists Ellis et al. (2017) examine the connections between violent trauma in childhood and the performance of adult male violence. Their participants "have lived in the shadow of violence since early childhood and it has endured to contaminate their adult lives" (A. Ellis et al., 2017, p. 704). Violent action is a response to "an unconscious attempt to come to terms with childhood experiences of extreme violence and trauma" (Ellis et al., 2017, p. 704). Their participants experienced some extreme forms of violence, humiliation and loss of power in childhood, and in young adulthood constructed a reputation for violence in other areas of social life in order to regain control. They stress that it is not trauma alone that results in adult male violence, rather "the traumatised individual must be encouraged to value violence" and be subject to gendered socialisation that "stresses toughness, stoicism and physicality" (Ellis et al., 2017, p. 712). In earlier work, Winlow and Hall (2009) theorise how past trauma, humiliation and haunting experiences of violence and powerlessness can generate a 'retaliate first' mentality, where men instigate violent behaviours in the face of little provocation to make up for past

humiliation. Cesaroni and colleagues' (2023) study also focuses on the connection between past traumas and masculinity, and advocates for gender-response informed care in prisons. In the context of the Scottish and Canadian prison systems, they argue that high levels of incarcerated young men suffer from untreated post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and argue that behaviours connected to prison masculinities maintain symptoms of anxiety and depression (Cesaroni et al., 2023). The 'prison code' of stoicism, suppressing emotion, and the continued use of violence and toughness as a resource to emulate hegemonic masculine ideals inhibits help-seeking behaviours (Sabo et al., 2001).

In conclusion, the range of studies reviewed above point to various theories on the genesis of violence in criminal men's lives. Some suggest violence is a response to childhood trauma in the family home, whereas others position violence as a social performance in educational settings. Prison researchers also suggest that violence is a performative endeavour and used as a resource in the social space of the prison. Insights are suggestive that gender subjectivities are constructed through a negotiation of toughness, a suppression of vulnerability and a performance of violence. Viewing the phenomenon of male violence through this lens raises questions on how educational roles, identities, backgrounds and intersectional locations feature in relations amongst boys and men, and how violence features in the main themes of this study, including educational engagement, exclusion and belonging, vulnerability and fragility.

Desistance: Gender and Transformative Identities?

I now turn to the gendered processes of desistance, and the implications for education post-release from prison. Carlsson (2013) and Messerschmidt (2005a) argue that desistance journeys are deeply embedded in masculine subjectivity. Masculine signifiers such as employment, marriage/co-habitation and fatherhood play a role in the move away from reoffending. Sampson and Laub's (2001) longitudinal research, as discussed in Chapter Two, demonstrates how 'informal social controls' such as a lasting marriage and steady employment, contribute to successful desistance. Conversely, Giordano et al. (2002), in an equally important study, offer a counterpoint and develop a theory of cognitive transformation where 'hooks for change' are part of an individual's inner will, or 'agency' to change, "even in the absence of traditional frameworks of support and resources like those provided ... by a spouse or good job" (p. 992).

Gadd and Farrall (2004) suggest that "criminologists engaged with critical debates about gender and sexuality have struggled to incorporate the phenomenon of desistance into their analyses" (p. 127). They argue that although desistance theorists have explored

the effect of traditional roles and markers of masculinity, they fail to “spot the gendered nature of men’s places within these spheres, and [studies are] hence devoid of an analysis of power, wider social consequences and the complexity of meaning that social and personal relationships have for the people in question” (Gadd & Farrall, 2004, p. 131).

Using a narrative, psychosocial approach, Gadd and Farrall (2004) delve into the stories of desistance and unstable change of two ‘criminal careerists’ and suggest that after interrogation of their relationships with partners – including many examples of domestic violence – their participants were able to position themselves through various masculine discourses to make sense of their changing relationships with crime. Normative ideals of manhood are explored and anxieties surfaced in the narratives. Similarly, Morran (2023) argues that key issues related to desistance journeys are inherently gendered and can be anxiety inducing for men who commit crime. Morran notes that the participants in their study, who were engaged on a violence reduction programme, found the process of desistance and moving away from violence an emasculating one; they questioned what kind of man they would become, and crucially, asked if they would be more ‘like a woman’ at the end of the programmes. These questions relate to fear of vulnerability which is equated with feminised ways of being. They found that “men had extremely limited (and often unsupportive) networks, particularly of other men, in their lives” (Morran, 2023, p. 740) and performing non-violent identities was an unknown that many struggled with: “What would living differently and non-violently involve?” (Morran, 2023, p. 740). Morran found that investing in activities that enhance masculine identities, such as sport, enables desisters to move away from violent behaviours and old identities without committing to reformed, or feminised subjectivities. They argue: “Such strategies therefore enabled a type of ‘reformatory’ or desistance-focused activity upon which they can credibly draw, without having to engage in or embrace a ‘different’, more ‘feminised’ style of thinking and speaking about oneself” (Morran, 2023, p. 742).

In relation to alternative but credible masculinised desistance identities, research also suggests that fatherhood, as a hegemonic and traditional masculinised role, is an important ‘hook for change’ in desisters’ lives (Giordano et al., 2002). Boonstoppel’s (2019) research found that distinct patterns of behaviour can be identified in how at-risk men perceive their role as a father and how it influences their decision to desist from crime. They argue that, as institutions such as marriage and employment become less stable, parenthood becomes more likely amongst this group, and may therefore pose “the most likely pathway to desistance” (Boonstoppel, 2019, p. 336). They assert that ‘good fathers’ will “emotionally invest in their children, nurture them, [be] involved in child-rearing, and

provide for children's physical and economic well-being" (Boonstoppel, 2019: p. 338). Boonstoppel's study found that "for desisting men, fatherhood fostered a sense of maturity and self-efficacy, especially when engaged in the routine of child-rearing activities and other behaviours expected of fathers" (p. 347).

Becoming a father provided a new identity as many saw themselves differently after becoming fathers (Boonstoppel, 2019). Desisters embraced responsibility and a new, improved and mature identity, whereas persisters failed to grasp this 'hook for change'. The daily routines of desisters changed and their children's needs were put before their own, whereas persisters' physical separation in residence, and breakdown in relationships from their children's mothers, limited the quality time they could spend with their children. Boonstoppel's study confirmed that where fathers cohabited with their partner's and children, they were better able to connect with their children and to provide care and education whereas non-residing fathers experienced more difficulties in these aspects of parenting.

Carlsson (2013) further explores the gendered implications of fatherhood and 'father roles' in the desistance process, suggesting that "successfully doing masculinity and desisting from crime is contingent on the offenders being able to live up to the normative expectations that are placed on them as they attempt to enter conventional life" (p. 678). Departing from traditional desistance theory which suggests that developing alternative identities post-offending means cutting off an individual's past (Laub & Sampson, 2001) and moving away from every aspect of a former criminal identity, Carlsson (2013) instead suggests that performing the father role successfully in connection to past crimes can work towards desistance. They describe how many of the participants in their study worked with NGOs and ex-offender organisations in their employment post-reoffending (Carlsson, 2013). Integral to doing peer mentoring successfully, Carlsson's participants needed to explicitly use their past experiences to do their jobs properly and meaningfully and this contributed towards the 'maintenance of desistance' and the redemptive acts needed to continue moving forwards and away from crime. For Carlsson's participants working in these roles helped them to achieve provider status through employment as well as adhering to redemption scripts. They argue:

"The men's masculinity projects as "workers" and "providers" is part of a larger strategy to "make good", and this form of employment is a way to do that while still legitimately and successfully being "real, grown-up men" in the face of an often long process of cumulative disadvantage." (Carlsson, 2013, p. 680)

Similarly to the other studies discussed, Carlsson (2013) found that persisters who were unable to move away from crime struggled with the normative structures of masculinity and failed to perform their genders “in accordance with heteronormative codes, and this rendered them on a continuing pathway to persistence” (p. 683). They conclude: “persistence is impelled by the offender not being able to make the transition into male adulthood” (Carlsson, 2013, p. 683).

In sum, classic desistance theory suggests that traditional markers of masculinity – employment, marriage, starting a family – can provide informal social control on men who commit crime, and contribute to the desistance process. Critiques offered suggest that ‘hooks for change’ do not necessarily need to be in the form of traditional institutional roles, and can instead be related to an individual’s perception of what will support transformation. Masculinity scholars suggest that more in-depth analysis of men’s lived experiences in relationships and fatherhood is needed to understand how masculine identities can be reshaped to harness and “motivate more positive, responsible and achievable ways of accomplishing masculinity.” (Morran, 2023, p. 749). Successful desistance journeys are reliant on an array of factors including material and structural security upon release, recovery from drug and alcohol addiction, positive family relationships, self-reflection and networks of acceptance and support. Research has shown that desistance is a deeply masculinised journey where gendered trajectories and signifiers of heteronormativity play an important role in successful maturation to adulthood. Employment, stable relationships and in particular fatherhood can offer signs of successful desistance and aid the process of identity change. Lastly, at the time of writing, I have not located any empirical studies which focus on the relationship between gender and education in prison leavers’ desistance journeys. Educational participation, in the prison as well as in the community has been discussed as part of an integrated desistance journey (see chapter two). Research is needed to understand how gender features in moving towards education and away from offending, and how masculinity is potentially performed differently once men are engaging with education post release.

Conclusion and moving forwards

In conclusion, this chapter has reviewed the intersection between gender, violence and education at different points in time through a range of empirical studies. I argue that these insights are a useful springboard for investigating the relationship between gender and education in the life trajectories of prison leavers. Beginning with schooling – feminist discussions problematise deficit, ‘failing’ or ‘problem boys’ discourses, and instead

investigate the experiences of boys' schooling through an intersectional lens and examine power dynamics, hierarchies and issues with conformity in the school space. Studies reveal that concerns regarding engagement, achievement, peer group dynamics, interactions with school discourses, including relations with teachers, and performances of violence are implicated in the shaping of fledgling gender and learner identities. These studies add to the literature discussed in previous chapter on the STPP and offers more insight into the reasons why boys struggle in the school space and have negative experiences. The relationship revealed between gender and education in schooling is both illuminating and expansive, offering a roadmap on the key issues that impact prison leavers' educational capabilities and form the basis of enquiry in the empirical chapters. How does the performance and shaping of gendered subjectivities in school spaces contribute to the STPP? I have provided insight on how feminist deconstruction of 'problem boys' discourses can be helpful in understanding prison leavers' complex educational backgrounds moving beyond deficit discourses, especially through an intersectional lens, which is currently absent from the prison education literature.

I have also reviewed a range of studies that enquire into the gendered spaces of the prison and discussed the few studies which exist on the relationship between gender and education in the carceral space. Empirical insights support the assertion that the social demands of prison life are gendered in the homosocial, carceral space, and that these behaviours can spill into the classroom. Although these emerging studies have offered important insights, questions remain on the nature of relations in educational spaces and how a performance of gender subjectivity impacts educational engagement. Violence has an important and central function in the performance of masculinities in the space of the prison, and I have also offered diverse insights on the genesis of violence in offenders' lives. Some argue it is socially constructed while others contend that violence is a response to childhood trauma. There is little understanding however on how violence impacts educational journeys and to what extent it disrupts education in the school, prison and the community.

Moreover, the relationship between gender theory and education in prison masculinities and desistance theory is underdeveloped. What is the intersection between capabilities in and through education and developing gender subjectivities during and post-prison? How does a performance of gender feature in prisoners' motivations to avoid or attend education? As stated previously, at the time of writing, the intersection between education and gender in desistance journeys has not been researched. How are these

complex processes of identity change reflected in journeys post-prison? Chapter Four establishes the theoretical framework of this study, and gives an account of how the theories discussed in the empirical studies reviewed so far can provide further insight on gender and education in the lives of prison leavers.

Chapter Four: Developing a Conceptual Framework

Introduction

This chapter establishes a conceptual framework to interpret the empirical findings of this study. I offer insights on poststructuralist feminist theory, hegemonic masculinities theory, and intersectionality, and discuss how they are crucial for unpacking the subjectivities and identities of adult men in the justice system. In this chapter, I also outline my conception of education through the Capability Approach (CA) and expand upon how prison leavers' educational trajectories are positioned as an issue of social justice. This conception provides a normative position on education, especially focusing on the constraints on participation, as well as offering insights into how curriculum can expand capabilities. I also offer key theoretical overviews on imprisonment and desistance.

Beginning with gender theory, the first theory to be discussed is R.W. Connell's (2005) masculinities theory which features in multiple studies on school and prison masculinities discussed in Chapter Three. Connell's work offers important insights on hierarchy, social power, identity and violence. The second theoretical lens draws upon feminist poststructuralist analysis and discusses the work of Judith Butler (2004, 2006, 2011) and gender theorists who apply their work to education (Youdell, 2006) and criminology (Collier, 1998, 2019). Poststructuralist feminist analysis offers a destabilising view of gender categories and scrutinises identity as a fragile construct. I argue that this alternative lens contributes to insights on the shaping of prison leavers' complex gender subjectivity.

Connell's Hegemonic Masculinities Theory and Applications on Men in the Justice System

Prison leavers navigate precarious homosocial and often violent environments. Theories on hegemonic masculinities can offer insight into the complexity of hierarchical institutions and how power, vulnerability and violence feature in their journeys. Influenced by Antonio Gramsci's (1971) theory on hegemony, where a group sustains a leading position in social life, Connell (2005) argues that hegemonic masculine archetypes are not predicated on a fixed set of attributes but rather a contextual "successful claim to authority...[through]...cultural ideal and institutional power" (p. 75). Connell argues that "hegemonic masculinity can be defined as the configuration of gender practice which embodies the currently accepted answer to the problem of legitimacy of patriarchy, which guarantees the dominant position of men and the subordination of women" (p. 77).

The success of hegemony is relational and both women and men play complicit roles in the maintenance of patriarchal values and power. Connell (2005) argues that there is not just one type of hegemonic masculinity, for example: White, wealthy, heterosexual, middle-class men. Instead, several competing hegemonic masculinities, non-hegemonic masculinities (or subordinate masculinities), and indeed femininities which operate according to a gendered hierarchy (Connell, 2005). Masculinities and femininities can only exist in relation to each other and they are always contestable. Subcultural identifications of “delinquent” working-class youths for example can only exist in a patriarchal hierarchy which gives status and power to middle-class/upper-class White men, and disempowers working-class and Black boys/men both socially and economically (Collier, 1998, p. 75). Subordinate masculinities are characterised by “specific gender relations of dominance and subordination between groups of men” (Connell, 2005, p. 78). Subordinate masculinities – as well as those who perform ‘feminine’ behaviours, such as vulnerability and emotion, and appear to reject hegemonic masculine behaviours – are also relegated to the bottom of the hierarchy and are excluded and socially punished. In order to move away from feminine or subordinate roles, “men pay a heavy price through having to suffer the pains of suppressing emotions that threaten or contradict the exercise of power” (Ellis, 2016, p. 23). Relational concepts help to understand the relations of power that exist on the wings, and how more vulnerable men are subordinated and at greater risk of violence. In the prison setting, subordinated men are targeted for vulnerable behaviours, such as self-exclusion or showing emotion (Murray, 2020), and some are excluded because of their crime, for example sex offences against children (Maguire, 2019). Connell notes that we must recognise “relations of alliance, dominance and subordination. These relationships are constructed through practices that exclude and include, that intimidate, exploit” (p. 37).

Masculine vulnerability is understood through this lense in multiple empirical studies drawing on masculinities theory and research has demonstrated how those who perform subordinate masculinities are more likely to be the victim of, and perpetrate violence against others. Levell has theorised the role of vulnerability in the performance of masculine violence in adult spaces. They suggest that masculine vulnerability and protest masculinity are in a “symbiotic relationship” (Levin, 2022, p. 162) where one cannot exist without the other. Drawing upon qualitative research with men who witnessed violence as children, and perpetrated violence in gangs and on-road in adulthood, Levell argues that their participants “sought spaces through which to seek power over vulnerability, through the use of their own violence in agentic ways, at school and on-road” (p. 163). Arguing that violence and vulnerability are “two sides of the same coin” (p. 163), an understanding of

the role of vulnerability in violent masculine behaviours is core to an exploration of the function of violence in a range of social settings, including the prison.

Connell's stress on the relational element of masculinities (Whitehead, 2005) is highly salient in acknowledging the inequalities and hierarchies marginal men face in broader society. Inequalities and subjugation exist for men of colour and the working-classes and they can be subordinated by White, wealthy and middle-class in institutional spaces. Connell (2005) argues that subordination can lead to resistance and 'protest masculinity'. In their empirical research, Connell notes that working-class men shape their identities in late adolescence without the prospect of stable employment (see McDowell & Bonner-Thompson, 2020) and early responses to class deprivation and powerlessness can lead to "a good deal of class injury... sense of limited options and constricted practice, as well as class anger" (Connell, 2005, p. 115). Connell's respondents also demonstrated an aversion to authority in both the family home and workplace, as well as experiencing "violence, school resistance, minor crime, heavy drug/alcohol use, occasional manual labour" (p. 110) and so on. The concept of masculine resistance against authority is important in understanding the trajectories of boys from school to prison, discussed in Chapters Two and Three, especially considering the overrepresentation of boys from working-class and minority ethnic backgrounds who are excluded for disruptive behaviours. Connell also discusses how Black men are positioned in a White supremacist hierarchy and relations are characterised by "institutional oppression and physical terror" (p. 80). Black men's fear of White men's violence, especially police violence, is rooted in the history of colonialism and continues in the contemporary judicial system, where they are positioned as the "ideal offender" and "unvictims" of crime (Long, 2021, p. 355).

Connell (2005) stresses that few men actually successfully emulate hegemony correctly, but all men benefit from the "patriarchal dividend" (p. 79) – the power gained through the subordination of women, especially those higher up the socioeconomic ladder. Although middle-class men are able to wield power over subordinate groups of men, Connell also draws out vulnerabilities. In *Men of Reason*, Connell's (2005) empirical work explores gender relations amongst the middle-classes and discusses how power is navigated through hierarchical workplaces characterised by "formal authority and tight social control" ambivalent attitudes towards feminist gains and negotiating the "weight of formal education as a cultural and institutional system" (p. 169). As "the bearers of skill" (Connell, 2005, p. 55), middle-class men benefit from shifts in the labour market (in contrast to working-class men) and the growth of credentialism "linked to a higher education system that selects and promotes along class lines" (Connell, 2005, p. 55).

Connell insists that these groupings of men are relational in nature, they are not static or fixed and must be understood within a context of historical, social and political change. Although there is a dearth in the literature on the experiences of middle class men in prison, theoretical insights on the identities of middle-class men are important for understanding their minority status in prisons and their positioning in relation to other men (Jewkes, 2005; Nichols, 2021).

Offering further insight on masculinities and crime, James Messerschmidt (2004) applied Connell's theory of masculinities in their empirical analysis of both adolescents and adult men in the justice system. Using their 'structured action theory' – in short, "what people do under specific social constraints" (Messerschmidt, 2004, p. 3) – and drawing upon West and Zimmerman's (2009) notions of 'doing gender', Messerschmidt maps the "moment of engagement" (p. 9). This relates to a life juncture when disempowered young men take up the project of hegemonic masculinity through delinquency and violent crime. Messerschmitt suggests that most men who engage with crime are from subordinated, classed and racialised locations and use their masculinity as a way of accomplishing manhood when other resources for 'doing gender' are constrained. This can relate to struggles with being a provider when unemployment is more likely amongst working-class men and racialised men for example. Messerschmidt's use of hegemonic masculinities theory positions disempowered men as agentic beings striving for and achieving male power through the perpetration of crime, and this includes a willingness to use violence. A final point focuses on Sim's (1994) reflections on hegemonic masculinities theory. They echo Connell's cautionary note, within the prison context, that gender relations are incomplete and always changing, therefore a possibility for "everyday contestation of power" (p. 111) and opportunities for change are ever-present, within evolving individual identities and wider power structures. As numerous masculinities scholars have pointed out however (see Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005) this can be neglected in the application of hegemonic masculinities theory and has led to a critique of theory especially around a reinforcement of hegemonic characteristics or traits amongst groups of dominate men.

Much of the criticism has been articulated through a feminist poststructuralist lens. Francis and Paechter (2015) argue, for example, that the application of Masculinities theory reifies 'dualistic gender distinctions' and static typologies. Hood-Williams, (2001) also argues that theoretical arguments which draw upon masculinities theory can be tautological. Collier suggests instead that scrutiny of "sexed bodies" (p. 22), in other words how masculinities are tied to the masculine body, can be useful in unravelling the sex/gender dichotomy that is at the heart of criticisms of masculinities theory. Collier also

criticises masculinities scholars for ignoring the work of feminist criminologists. In their own work, Collier draws upon feminist poststructuralist accounts of gender subjectivity which, in the words of Berggren, allows an exploration of the “instability of sexual categorizations and the complex interdependencies of inequalities” (Berggren, 2014, p. 235).

In sum, hegemonic masculinities theory is a useful lens through which to understand gender practice, power relations and hierarchies amongst men in the justice system and how their position is understood as subjugated in broader society. However, criticism suggests that a robust scrutiny of gender categories is needed to disentangle the sex/body dichotomy, and ensuing a way of describing the instability of identity and the consequent shaping of subjectivity. The following section gives an overview of how poststructuralist feminist analysis can be employed to support an understanding of the construction of gender subjectivity, and how accounts of category destabilisation and fragile identities can support an interpretation of the complexity of formerly imprisoned men’s lives and narratives.

Poststructuralist Feminist Analysis in Criminological Research

Poststructuralist accounts of gender which offer critiques of masculinities theory are less-widely used in criminological accounts. Collier’s (1998) work, *Masculinities, Crime and Criminology*, offers a standalone and convincing introduction to how poststructuralist feminist ideas can be understood within a criminological context and suggests that masculinities theory, amongst other shortfalls, fails to fully address “the complexity and multi-layered nature of the social subject” (Collier, 2019, p. 21). What is a subject? As described in Chapter One, the poststructuralist concept of the subject and subjectivity derives from Michel Foucault’s (1975) development of ‘discourse’, and how people are shaped and constrained by complex relations of power operating through institutional discursive practices. Foucault (1975) examines how punishment is no longer orchestrated through public displays of gratuitous violence as documented in their re-telling of the “spectacle of the scaffold” (p. 32). Instead, the discursive practices of the prison and punishment include strict control of movement, surveillance, the language of categorisation and mundane, everyday practices of work. The bureaucratisation and accumulation of data on prisoners’ lives are the primary means of coercive control (Foucault, 1975, p. 135).

Drawing upon Foucault’s (1975) work, Judith Butler (2006) applies this framework to gendered power and practice and how the human subject comes “into being in and through the mark(s) of gender” (p. 12). Salih explains, “...there is no ‘natural body’ which pre-exists culture and discourse, since all bodies are gendered from the beginning of their

social existence” (p. 140). Butler (2006) insists that nothing about these gender discourses is natural; they are decidedly social. Gender subjectivity is constituted through discursive practices and this is where the ‘truth’ (Butler, 1990, p. 23) of the sex/gender binary unravels. The binaries of male and female bodies, and corresponding masculine and feminine characteristics or traits, are often unstable, fluid and do not always conform to dominant gender regimes. Butler suggests that gender identities are “not logical or analytic features of personhood, but, rather, socially instituted and maintained norms of intelligibility.” (p. 23). Normative ideals of gender are bound up with gender regimes. The “heterosexual matrix” (p. 6) coined by Butler, is a gender regime which ties sexuality and desire with sexed bodies, and a social phenomenon upon which Butler argues sexual minorities, especially homosexuals and transgender people, are excluded and Othered.

Collier (2019) argues that feminist poststructuralist accounts offer powerful arguments to destabilise the positivist paradigm which positions men’s criminal acts through pathology. They contend that the “male criminological subject” (Collier, 2019, p. 29) is destabilised in this argument. Instead, normative masculinity is unravelled to reveal a fragile, fluid identity where constitutive acts are understood through compulsory frames of gender construction. Collier argues that normative masculinity reifies dualistic notions on gender, and theorists should strive for a deconstructive moment which involves “cross-cutting” (p. 30) gender categories. They assert that identity is contingent on instability and constituted on discourses that exclude and other minoritised men in the justice system. Collier suggests that the feminist poststructuralist task in criminology should move away from dualistic notions of gender and instead focus on the shaping of gender subjectivity through repeated and constitutive acts, in order to undo the normative male subject of criminology.

The following final insights from poststructuralist feminist analysis offer further theoretical perspectives for this research, especially on the diverse discursive practices of gendered spaces. In *Undoing Gender*, Butler (2004) asks questions around the survivability of personhood in a gendered world. Butler is interested in how gender regimes dictate cultural intelligibility and render some lives unliveable through exclusionary practices. This is highly salient when considering the role of gendered practices in the heteronormative space of the prison, especially in understanding their role in the high self-harm, suicide and violence rates (see Chapter One). Gender regimes dictate how men are expected to cope with life adversity, mental health and childhood trauma inside and beyond the prison (Cesaroni et al., 2023; Chandler, 2019; Maguire, 2021; Murray, 2020). It is through repeated performance of one’s gender that subjects strive for acceptance, for

example through performative acts constituted through normative masculinity, such as repressing emotion, but many on the margins are still often excluded despite complicity and compliance. Performativity is an important concept in understanding the Butlerian view on subjectivity and alterity, or 'otherness'. They claim that subjects perform every day acts to shore up their identities in the social realm. It is not a "singular act, but a repetition and a ritual" (Butler, 1990, p. xv) performed in a variety of social contexts in order to gain social acceptance. Those who fail to perform their genders properly are socially punished and rendered unintelligible and excluded. In order to stop exclusion of alternative gender expressions, Butler (2006) argues that we should move towards a gender fluid future where identity instability is the norm.

Lastly, Francis (2001) proposes that subjects perform their identities differently depending on the discursive environment, especially who they are talking to and how the "spectator view" (Francis & Paechter, 2015, p. 786) influences their positioning. In education research, Francis & Paechter (2015) argue that the "features of the local discursive and material collage which enable gender production and recognition" (p. 786) should also be scrutinised. This enables an understanding of how the subject is influenced in a particular context and how gender performativity may be influenced and complicated. These insights are discussed further in the following chapter on methodology (Chapter Five).

To sum up, the theoretical application above will be used throughout the empirical chapters to facilitate a nuanced understanding of the complexity of how gendered subjects are moulded by social spaces, within institutions and through relations with others. Masculinities theory and poststructuralist feminist analysis offer powerful, and diverse ways of understanding gender and both lenses will be utilised to shine a light on prison leavers' complex educational trajectories.

Intersectionality and Identity in Criminological Theory

Born "out of the longstanding oppression of Black people" (Barmaki, 2020, p. 486), and especially Black women, Kimberley Crenshaw (1991) developed the theory of intersectionality in the early 1990s. Intersectionality is a theory which seeks to understand differences amongst social groups, not just between groups (Crenshaw, 1991). She explored how identity markers, such as race and gender, can coalesce and interact to further subjugate those experiencing disadvantage (Youdell, 2006b). Crenshaw (1991) began their work focusing on the intersection of racism and sexism in the lives of women of colour, and how "intersecting patterns" of oppression:

“Tend not to be represented within the discourses of either feminism or antiracism. Because of their intersectional identity as both women and of color within discourses that are shaped to respond to one or the other, women of color are marginalised within both.” (p. 1244)

Crenshaw's (1991) arguments draw attention to the shape of oppression in marginalised people's lives, and offered a lens through which to understand how disadvantages intersect and interact with structures of power to marginalise people further. Phipps (2017) argues that intersectionality “is invaluable in its exhortation to move away from one-dimensional notions, towards ideas of a co-constitution of social categories, positions and encounters which produce important differences in subjectivity, experience and practice” (p. 817).

Intersectionality has not been used widely in criminological research (Parmar, 2017) Parmer argues there has been a hesitancy to problematise and surface issues connected to race, especially in British Criminology, and meaningfully explore how inequalities overlap with other areas of experience such as gender and religion. She claims the absence of intersectionality results in “a lag between the lived realities of minority ethnic groups and criminological academic scholarship.” (Parmar, 2017, p. 35) Elsewhere in the social sciences, intersectionality has been used widely since the 2000s, including within education (Bhopal, 2020) and gender and education (Mac An Ghaill, 2019).

In this study, it is important to offer an understanding of the intersectional aspects of identity – gender, social class, race, (dis)ability and age – and how these understandings of identity can intersect further disadvantaging minoritised men. Mac an Ghaill (2019) suggest employing “a recalibration of interpretive strategies [which] opens up the possibility of understanding the dynamics of gender through other social categories” (p. 337). One such category is class. Class is an important identity marker for men in the justice system, and analysing how it intersects with gender, race and disability can offer knowledge on how subjectivities are shaped. Collier (1998) deconstructs how male subjectivities in criminology are constituted in relation to normative masculine accomplishments and how this has particular significance to class localities. Historically, Collier (1998) charts how gendered understandings of youth crime were analysed through mostly classed locations and were judged, in particular, against the values and practices of normative male middle-class youth and explained as a series of absences, “not just of monetary resources but also the (related) impoverishments of (a lack of) educational credentials, rewarding employment” (p. 75). As noted in Chapter One, Black and working-class men are positioned as ‘ideal offenders’ and ‘non-ideal victims.’ Collier deconstructs

this norm and suggests that, instead, the male-dominated and class locations of predominately White, male criminologists, courts, police and prisons should be scrutinised, as many feminist criminologists have suggested before him (Smart, 2009). Maguire's (2021) *Male, Jail, Failed* focuses on the intersection between classed and gendered trajectories of 'revolving door' prisoners, and seeks to unpick "the cost of constructing masculinities under profound structural disadvantage" (p. 2). This account offers deep analysis of how gender and class coalesce in the lives of men living on the margins, and how a resistant and tough masculinity is shaped in schooling in response to the elements of the STPP.

Middle-class men are under-researched in prison literatures. Jewkes (2005) suggests that middle class men in prison may adopt student/work identities as an alternative from the dominant and tough masculine performances. By flaunting their skills it may create a "psychological one-upmanship" to their working class peers (Cohen and Taylor 1972 cited in Jewkes 2005). Vincent and Ball's (2007) insights on definitions of class also offer useful insight to inform the understanding of class in this study. They suggest understandings of class should move beyond limited or blunt markers of social location such as occupation or income bracket. They argue, instead, that class should be understood as a relational construct (Vincent & Ball, 2007). They comment: "The class and class fractional identities and distinctions we describe involve a sense of belonging to a group and a sense of differentiation from others" (Vincent & Ball, 2007, p. 54). I argue that a relational and intersectional understanding of how class overlaps with gender has a central role to play in analysing prison leavers' educational experiences.

Discussed in Chapter Two, men from ethnic minorities are over-represented in the justice system (Sturge, 2023). Often positioned as "the ideal offenders", Black bodies and subjectivities are positioned as 'suspect' (Long, 2021), Parmar et. al argue: "Racial stratification, media discourse, popular and political narratives combine to produce the suspicious 'criminal type' who has—and almost always has had—a Black or brown face." (Parmar et al., 2023, p. 814). Race is an important feature of identity and subjugation and critical race theorists argue that it should be understood within an intersectional paradigm (Blackwell & Cruze, 2015). Race and class intersect to disadvantage boys and men further in criminal justice settings and within the community. Black, Asian and Black Mixed Race men are more likely to be targeted by the police in stop and search procedures (IOPC, 2022). Targeting is also more likely in deprived neighbourhoods, which serves to increase mistrust between ethnic minority communities and the police, thereby exacerbating isolation and exclusion of vulnerable populations (IOPC, 2022). As the literature review

has demonstrated, the STPP theorises and evidences the link between school and incarceration with boys from minority communities being negatively influenced by school mechanisms (Arnez & Condry, 2021; Dancy, 2014; Kim et al., 2021; Ladson Billings, 2011; Stahl, 2017).

Race and LDDs is a further intersectional issue in educational research, which questions the overrepresentation of Black children in special educational needs (SEN), highlighting disparities in support between White and ethnic minority children (Bronson, 2014). As discussed in Chapter One, men in the justice system are disproportionately affected by LDDs. In much of the schooling literature, students who experience disabilities or neurodiversity are bracketed as SEN. Youdell (2006) argues that individuals who display behaviours which do not demonstrate the 'ideal learner' identity – compliance, conformity – are “constituted as beyond the bounds of normative discourse of behaviour and learning (if not intelligence) and, outside these bounds of normativity, the special student is abnormal, s/he is Other” (p. 131). The term referred to in this project is Learning Disabilities and Differences (LDDs), which is favoured in the prison education discourse (Education Committee, 2022a). I argue that this term moves away from the othering that occurs in the SEN discourse, and people experiencing disabilities, differences and neurodiversity are described as having additional needs rather than 'special' needs, which implies abnormal needs. Lastly, age is featured in the desistance literature and analysis will reflect how participants' intergenerational attitudes and beliefs impacts gender and learner identities, as well as their own subjective experiences and reflections on the influence of ageing on criminal trajectories (Laub & Sampson, 2001).

In sum, intersectionality is an important theoretical concept in this research and has been used in feminist theory to unpack how identity markers intersect to disadvantage marginalised groups. This theoretical lens is highly relevant in the current research and intersectional identities will be centred in the analysis. Analysis of the interlocking disadvantages that men in the justice system experience due to their complex social identities, will help shape understanding of how subjectivities are formed under “related systems of oppression, discrimination and domination.” (Parmar, 2017, p. 35).

Capability Approach (CA) and Education

The Capability Approach (CA) is a partial theory on social justice and is being used in this project as an orienting theory, rather than a detailed application in the empirical chapters of this study. The CA advocates for all individuals to have the opportunity to engage with quality education in order to develop capabilities which constitute a 'good' life.

If an individual cannot participate or flourish in education due to biographical, social, cultural or pedagogical constraints (Walker & Unterhalter, 2007), then it becomes an issue of social justice. Providing insight on how exclusion and non-participation in quality education is an issue of institutional inequality and injustice, the CA surfaces the complex web of barriers that people, who are often from deprived communities, navigate in order to access education. (Sen, 1999; Cin & Walker, 2016; Walker, 2012; Walker & Unterhalter, 2007; Wilson-Strydom & Walker, 2015). This theoretical insight is captured in the use of the term and concept 'educational capabilities' throughout this study. Capabilities through education refer to the skills, knowledge and opportunities that can be gained through positively interacting with education (Nussbaum, 2000). If individuals are unable to develop capabilities due to inequalities relating to their gender, race or (dis)ability and do not flourish in life as a consequence – it becomes an issue of that must be problematised and understood (Walker & Unterhalter, 2007). Educational models, aims and processes are also scrutinised to understand how individuals are positively and negatively impacted through curriculum, as well as analysing experiences of exclusion, inclusion and flourishing (Walker, 2019; Wilson-Strydom & Walker, 2015).

Criminological Theory and Insights: Desistance theory

In the literature review and conceptual framing so far, I have chosen not to include certain elements of criminological theory, especially concepts which derive from positivist paradigms or theoretical constructs which focus on behavioural science or pathology. Rather, the conceptual framework I have created for this study is rooted in a sociological understanding of men's experiences within the justice system. However, some sociological perspectives from criminological theorising are useful in understanding the lives of prison leavers and therefore feed in to the theoretical framing of my research. The conceptual framework for this study is rooted in a sociological understanding of men in the justice system. However, some sociological perspectives in criminological theorising are useful in understanding the lives of prison leavers. Firstly, I use the theory of desistance to help understand prison leavers' life trajectories within and beyond prison. Desistance is the social phenomenon and process of moving away from crime (Maruna, 2001a) and has been discussed at length in the literature review. Some desistance theorists claim that desistance is a deeply gendered process (Boonstoppel, 2019; Carlsson, 2013) and education is also featured as a "hook for change" (Giordano et al., 2002, p. 1027) in moving away from crime. I use these theoretical insights on exploring the relationship between education and gender in criminal justice and community settings.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have offered a range of complex theoretical strands to interpret how the forming of gender subjectivities and educational capabilities shape the lives of men who have had contact with the justice system. The poststructuralist lens of gender subjectivity and the framework of masculinities will be employed to explore prison leavers' gendered experiences in educational spaces. Masculinities theory is needed to recognise the hierarchies and social power of the prison leaver group, and poststructuralist theoretical analysis is needed to disentangle gender performances from sexed bodies, and deconstruct subjectivities constituted through competing and complex discursive practices and identities (Youdell, 2006). I propose to combine both frames to interpret and examine the hegemony and instability of subject formations, as well as the identity politics of masculinity in diverse spatial and temporal locations. In addressing the gendered nature of formerly imprisoned men's educational experiences, I will use intersectionality theory to surface how individual biographies and identity makers relating to social class, race, (dis)ability and age, coalesce with gender to shape and re-shape subjectivities. Men in prison must be understood intersectionally due to the overrepresentation of racialised and deprived socio-economic location of the prison population, as well as the influence of age and (dis)ability in educational trajectories. As there is an absence of Intersectional framings in Criminological analysis, including this theory in the framework will offer opportunities to surface the lived realities men in the justice system face in navigating interlocking axes of disadvantage. Finally, the constraints people experience when engaging with education will be problematised and understood through a partial theory of social justice. Using the CA framework, capabilities in and through education will be connected to the shaping of gendered lives and experiences. Lastly, I have also offered an overview of desistance theory and the gendered underpinnings of the processes which support a move away from crime.

Chapter Five: Research Methodology

Introduction

This study aims to centre the educational experiences of adult men who have experienced the justice system, and explore how an intersectional account of gender can support an understanding of the educational capabilities and gender subjectivities developed in diverse educational settings. In order to achieve the aims of this study, a decidedly qualitative approach has been employed which draws on feminist epistemological tools and praxis to interpret prison leavers' lives and educational trajectories. I begin this chapter by outlining the methodological approach by detailing the narrative and feminist epistemological tools I used to interpret the experiences of adult male prison leavers' lives. I offer a rationale for using poststructuralist feminist narrative analysis and build on the key theoretical ideas of this project: that subjectivities are shaped by the social world people experience, and identities are shifting and fragile.

Following this, I map the journey of (re)designing the research project due to COVID-19, explaining the institutional, logistical and bureaucratic limitations I navigated as a consequence of the global pandemic. I demonstrate how these challenges allowed me to think through key ethical and safeguarding issues, as well as broadening the research aims from the original design and moving from the original setting of the prison, to conducting a project in the community. I then move on to the logistical aspects of gaining access, and recruitment of participants in the community setting. Following this, I explain the research instruments including a series of interviews to elicit narratives, and how I used reflexivity as an important tool to surface the inherent tensions in the research process. I discuss the importance of researcher and respondents' positionality, background and biography, and the central role of scrutinising power relations inherent in the interview process with vulnerable groups.

It is important to offer an ethical understanding of the practical application of the use of the term "vulnerable groups" in my methodological praxis. The practical application of vulnerability with specific groups can pose ethical issues during the research process. As Gilson (2014) argues, rather than vulnerability being understood as part of the human condition and a state we all share, it is often viewed in negative terms and can engender further stigma, exclusion and othering. They argue "... it is used to categorize, isolate, and label those who are vulnerable, setting them apart from those who are not, and there is little recognition that vulnerability is a shared condition." (2014, p. 350). Gilson argues that the cause of a group or individual's vulnerabilities, including historical and social exclusion

should be focussed on; vulnerability should not be understood as a fixed label attached to a certain group of people.

In the context of this research, the following situational vulnerabilities are therefore relevant for this group. People in the justice system have often encountered many challenges in their lives including educational exclusion, violence and trauma. Many also have ongoing drug/alcohol issues (Best et. al, 2024), mental and physical health problems, and a lack of material and emotional support when leaving prison (Nugent, & Schinkel, 2016). Some have also developed a mistrust of those in authority. People who have been victims of crime, or have perpetrated a crime, are also interviewed many times by different officials, often causing them to relive difficult, traumatic events. Interviewing people who have experienced this level of trauma is complex and challenging, and in order to design a methodology that generates insights into participant practices, beliefs and values, it was imperative that I planned for and responded sensitively to the complex challenges and ethical issues that arose.

Qualitative approach: Narrative Methodologies and Feminist Epistemology

Denzin and Lincoln (2023) argue that traditional forms of scientific research, which build on knowledge constituted by researcher neutrality, quantitative paradigms and “definitive answers” (p. 68), are in many ways misaligned with qualitative research. They argue that “in a sense, the traditional and postmodern projects are incommensurate. We interpret, we perform, we interrupt, we challenge, and we believe nothing is ever certain” (Denzin & Lincoln, 2023, p. 68). Put another way, “qualitative researchers are interested not in prediction and control but in understanding” (Pinnegar, & Daynes, 2012, p. 3). Evans and Wallace have further argued that it is now generally recognised that a truly objective description of the world is not available and that what we know of the world, we know only through “our intersubjective experience of it” (Evans & Wallace, 2008, p. 491). Connell’s earlier work in “Which Way is Up?” (1971) asks important questions on the role of the researcher, their understanding of how theory and methodology are entwined to produce knowledge claims, and cautions against homogenising groups, especially in relation to the forming of an identity. These statements capture the ontological and methodological moorings of this study, which does not claim to represent an objective ‘truth’ of prison leavers’ lived experiences and identities, but an interpretation of their life stories.

I have chosen to use narrative enquiry to support an interpretation of former prisoners’ life stories. Riessman (2005) argues that “narratives do not mirror, they refract the past” (p. 6). They go on to explain that “individuals construct past events and actions in

personal narratives to claim identities and construct lives” (Riessman, 2011, p. 3).

Narrative is a useful tool to understand how subjectivities are shaped in the process of retelling one’s life story, and therefore supports the aims of this study. This section details two distinct forms of narrative enquiry: first, humanist, person-centred approaches such as life history narrative, often used in Narrative criminology (Maruna & Liem, 2021); and second, those which can be understood within a poststructuralist and discursive paradigm (Morison & Macleod, 2013). The former has been used in prison and desistance research and is a useful starting point; following this discussion, I will elaborate on feminist poststructuralist narrative that supports analysis in this project.

Evans and Wallace (2008) argue that narrative is a suitable methodological approach for understanding the experiences of imprisoned men. They report:

Narrative analysis is perhaps the only methodology that can fully reveal the struggle of living and forming an identity. Storytelling can bring some coherence to a confusing experience, which would well be an apt summation of the life experience of many prisoners. (p. 492).

Maruna’s (2001) early work has been instrumental in developing and utilising narrative criminology. Maruna and Liem (2021) reason that stories and storytelling constitute a cornerstone of the substance and practice of prison leavers’ lives – recounting the stories of their crimes over and over again, to people in authority, loved ones, and other prisoners. Autobiographies, they claim, are windows into selfhood and narrative criminology examines “what do stories do for their tellers and their listeners.” (Maruna and Liem, 2021, p. 128). Maruna and Liem touch on psychology, psychotherapy, sociology and cultural anthropology to argue that narrative is an agentic, deeply social practice which provides the opportunity to re-author one’s life experiences, bringing an individual a step closer to an imagined crime-free life. Maruna’s (2001) earlier and seminal work explored the importance of narrative in desistance theory and how a sustainable, workable and convincing story of change can be a cornerstone in the formation of others’ beliefs that the former criminalised subject really has changed. Maruna (2001) argues that:

An internalized desistance narrative is thought to play an important psychological function. A strong identity narrative can help people maintain their efforts to desist in the face of the hurdles, frustrations, disappointments, and temptations they will inevitably face in their efforts to reintegrate. (p. 132).

As discussed in Chapter Three, desistance narratives are deeply gendered and redemption scripts note a shift in agentic action; desisters are no longer victims of their difficult backgrounds; instead, they take control of their lives and visibly want to give back to their communities. Maruna’s (2001) narrator is an agentic subject striving towards

freedom: freedom from the prison, freedom from the past, freedom to live without stigma, judgement and structural inequalities experienced as a formerly imprisoned person.

Desistance trajectories, redemption narratives and agency are important topics in this study. However, to account for the shaping of gender subjectivity, and to fully examine the discursive frames that participants choose to take up during the interview when recounting educational experiences, a further theoretical lens is needed. As discussed above, the life story narrative is orientated around an agentic subject that crafts a story that will aid their own desistance journeys. Often such a narrative is constructed is for a social purpose and to please specific audiences, so in this sense, crafting a narrative is the agentic action of a self-conscious individual. This study aims instead to understand the instability of identity presented in the narratives, and how subjects invest in discursive frames (sub)consciously. As discussed in Chapter Four, Butler (1990; 2004) disagrees with the ontological moorings of a unified self and a fixed 'natural' identity, such as normative, binary constructions of gender and sexuality, such as male/female, straight/gay. Butler (1990; 2004) argues that to be socially accepted, we engage in performative behaviours that prove we belong to a certain category. Constructing an alternative identity from a different category is not a straightforward process. McKinlay (2010) argues that "the individual is not free to choose an identity in the way they might select an outfit" (p. 234). Instead, performativity is bound up in "speech acts" that

categorise an individual, group, behaviour or attitude and, simultaneously, allow others to recognise the difference signified ... Performativity is the materialisation of norms, a process that is inherently unstable, latent with the possibility of resistance. Performativity refers both to the fragility and the stubborn consistency of identity." (McKinlay, 2010, p. 235)

A subject's agency is therefore a performative process, bound up with fragility, instability, incoherence and importantly a dependence on a "discourse it does not choose" (Salih, 2004, p. 243). For a person to enact their agency, and change their identity and life, they continue to be bound up within a normative frame.

McKinlay (2010) further explains Butler's ideas: "The process of performative repetition inscribes and sediments norms upon the body and permits the emergence of a subject capable of resisting those norms" (p. 142). Squire and colleagues (2008) argue that poststructuralist narrative rejects the agentic storyteller (such as in narrative criminology) and favours an understanding of "multiple, disunified subjectivities" (p. 5). This type of narrative is "preoccupied with the social formations shaping language and subjectivity. In this tradition, the storyteller does not tell the story, so much as she/he is told

by it” (Squire et al., 2008, p. 5). I argue that this type of narrative methodology is useful for deconstructing and surfacing the struggles of men who have experienced prison. I argue that the gendered world in which they construct identity is not one of their choosing, and that many both resist and reify established norms of gender in the retelling of their experiences. Poststructuralist narrative is a useful frame within which to understand the complex processes prison leavers undergo when establishing a new identity post-prison, and how they make sense of their experiences of the past. Although life story narrative is useful for understanding the redemptive and social purposes of prison leavers’ life stories, a further poststructuralist frame is needed to interpret the deeply complex process of shaping and the reshaping of subjectivities, in the interview space and beyond.

In the following sections, I map the genesis of this study and the journey I experienced in designing and redesigning key elements of the project. Offering a candid reflection of how world events can impact the research process, I explain how altering one’s project can broaden the research aims and enrich the project, even if some elements are lost in the reshaping of the study.

Impossible Aims: Conducting Research with Men in Prison in a Global Pandemic

As discussed in Chapter One, I had experience of working in prisons before beginning this project, and my reflections during this experience represent the genesis of this study. The main aims of the original study were to understand how gender subjectivity was shaped in the space of the prison classroom, and how the diverse spaces of the prison impacted gender performativity. I also wanted to understand how schooling shaped learner identities and resonated with men in prison in the present day, especially considering intersectional aspects of identity including gender, class, race and (dis)ability. I wanted to interview adult men in prison to better understand the gendered and intersectional implications of educational engagement in adulthood.

Prisons are closed institutions where security is risk-managed and external researchers must undertake a stringent application process for their research project to be considered. After two years (part-time) of reading the literature, designing the study and preparing for the application process, my project came to a very sudden halt. The National Research Committee (NRC) at the Ministry of Justice (MoJ) issued a moratorium stating that all prison research would cease immediately. Prisons shut their doors and gates, much like the rest of the country, as the COVID-19 pandemic took hold. Over the next 18 months, a waiting game began. The MoJ offered a staged process of recovery – Stage 1 was pre-COVID conditions, Stage 5 was total lockdown where people in prison would

remain in their cells for 23 hours per day. Only at Stage 2, would the prison service consider external research applications (like mine) which were not COVID-related. During this period, I attended online conferences on prisons and prison education; I met other doctoral students who had reluctantly abandoned plans for qualitative face-to-face research in prisons, and had changed their projects to use only secondary sources. I decided to remain steadfast and continued to hope that the pandemic would allow prisons to open their doors for research again soon. As one of my underlying goals was to centre the voices of people in prison, I felt this was unachievable without conducting face-to-face research. At points it was excruciating being in a seemingly never-ending fieldwork limbo, but this hiatus also supported creativity, endurance and patience – perhaps less talked-about tools and skills in the researcher's toolkit. One possible solution that my supervisors and I examined was applying to do online interviews with participants in prison. This threw up many ethical conundrums to think through and supported a thorough analysis of the ethical dimension to a research project with imprisoned men.

At the heart of an ethically robust qualitative research project is the well-being of participants. Building trust, ensuring confidentiality and obtaining meaningful consent is the baseline of most educational research projects (BERA, 2018). Online interviewing in prisons left too many questions unanswered. How could I safeguard participants' ongoing consent at such a physical distance? As BERA guidelines suggest, researchers should behave in a respectful partnership with participants safeguarding their well-being, where they are aware that they can withdraw from the research at any time, with no negative consequences, and their personal information will remain anonymised and protected. If online interviews were to take place, how could I ensure that our interview would remain private, and prison officers would not be present? How could I ensure that the consent form would be understood fully by those with LDDs and how could I ensure well-being checks after the interview, when I would be at a physical distance from the prison? Additionally, technology is limited in prisons and the use of the ICT equipment that does exist would be prioritised for court cases and much-needed virtual family visits. Importantly, evidence has shown that the lockdowns imposed on the prison population did reduce the number of COVID-19 deaths; however, the toll on well-being and mental health was dramatic (HM Chief Inspector of Prisons, 2021; HMPPS, 2020; Maycock, 2021). A range of critics questioned whether the strictness of the lockdowns had struck the right balance when considering prisoners' mental health, isolation and the ongoing drug epidemic across prison estates (Johnson et al., 2021). Prisons were often running on a skeleton staff due to staff absences related to COVID-19, and the additional resources that

it would have taken to run my project would have created unforeseen additional pressure. My original project had also been intended to focus on the emotional dynamics of prison spaces (Crewe et al., 2014) and how masculinities are influenced by the education department as opposed to within the wings. Collecting data on this important aspect of my project would have been impossible at a distance.

In December 2021, I made the final decision to interview formerly imprisoned men in the community rather than those still in prison. Conducting interviews in the community would make it much easier to safeguard participants' well-being, as I would be able to be physically present in the interview and liaise directly with support workers of vulnerable participants (see next section). Although I was disappointed to no longer have the ethnographic dimension to my project, at the same time it opened up an opportunity to focus on extending the narrative beyond the prison gate. As discussed in Chapter Three, there is a considerable dearth in the research on the interplay between gender and education in the community post-release. By interviewing adult men in the community, I could provide insight and knowledge in this area. Collecting and interpreting participants' experiences of school and prison was still possible; the only change was that both areas would be recalled retrospectively in the interview. I was content that my project conducted in the community would gain insights on the original aims of exploring the shaping of gender subjectivity in educational spaces, both school and prison. Further, by adding analysis on life and education in the community, I would be able to offer important reflections on how education is navigated beyond the prison gate. The process of redesigning the project was stressful at times, however it has enriched my project by extending the analysis of former prisoners' lives and allowed me to think clearly about ethical issues and placing participants' well-being at the centre of the research process.

Interviewing Adult Male Prison Leavers in the Community: Access, Partners, Recruitment and Sample

I recruited research participants in the community in different but interconnected ways. I hoped to recruit people who reflected the main demographics of the adult male prison population and allow multiple voices to be centred in the project. The prison population has an overrepresentation of people from diverse ethnic minorities and various heritages, but the vast majority of people in prison are White British and from working-class backgrounds (Small, 2019). There is also an overrepresentation of people with LDDs (Speilman, 2021). As Maguire (2016) notes in their doctoral project, there is also a dearth of research on the experiences of middle-class men in prison, as they are a minority

amongst the prison population, and I therefore hoped to recruit men from more affluent backgrounds too.

I contacted numerous organisations that work with formerly imprisoned people in the community, and leaned on professional and personal networks, especially prison scholars. I communicated the desired profile of interview participants to the organisations' leads and received a strong response from four organisations who offer a range of services to prison leavers. These services include vocational skills training, advocacy, housing support and careers services; the organisations are nationally recognised and located in different parts of the country – South East, West of England and the Midlands. As a result of the variety of service-providers and geographical areas from which the sample was selected, a range of people from different backgrounds volunteered to be part of the project. Two of the research partners for this project are organisations that offer education and employability skills training to people following their release from prison. One is sited opposite a large prison in the South of England, and the other is based in a large city in the South East of England that grapples with organised crime and young people's vulnerability to being recruited by gangs. The first organisation offers employability-based training and support, as well as contacts for work on construction sites. The second organisation offers opportunities to enhance literacy and numeracy skills as well as employability workshops and mentorship. I also worked with an organisation in the Midlands that provides housing and support for prison leavers, and lastly an organisation that advocates, supports and contributes to policy-making on issues connected to prison education. All organisations will remain anonymous in this project in order to protect the confidentiality of the participants.

In all four organisations I liaised with gatekeepers in order to recruit participants. Although some prison leavers were keen to be interviewed, other project partners expressed their clients' hesitancy to be part of the project, and especially their feelings around telling a stranger their life stories. I stressed that the aim of my project was understanding their views on education, including where things could be improved in the future, and that I was not interested in their pasts in terms of their crimes, although if they wanted to talk, I was ready to listen to any aspect of their lives. I offered the information sheet about my project (see Appendix A) and I also gained clearance from the University College London (UCL) Institute of Education (IOE) ethics committee and the NRC to offer £40 love2shop vouchers for each participant on completion of two interviews. The Director of the organisation providing housing support was particularly keen that there should be a financial incentive for their clients' participation. I agreed that telling one's life story is a

type of emotional labour, and that participants should be remunerated for their time, as well as covering travel costs and refreshments.

Most participants accepted the vouchers and were very grateful for them. Three refused to take the vouchers and asked me to pass them on to people less fortunate than them. I was unable to offer the final four participants vouchers. After further liaison with the NRC, it emerged that the original agreement to offer the vouchers was rescinded, and they cautioned me to only recruit using the information sheets. Their stance was that participants should not need monetary incentives to take part in the research, and that they should be willing to share their stories for the research aims and betterment of society. It is out of the scope of this chapter to engage in a full discussion on the use of incentives, but as Holway and Jefferson (2000) have suggested when discussing payment to their research participants,

by paying them for their time, we may variously have been experienced as equalising the relationship (our money for their time)... For people who were often unemployed or at least very hard-up, remuneration for their time was important, and a mark of respect for their participation. (p. 3)

As well as agreeing with this sentiment, I also felt that a modest monetary incentive was a small price to pay for the emotional labour involved in the retelling of their stories (as this chapter and the following chapters outline) and how their insights have provided the backbone for this study. It seemed an equitable transaction that supported people who were living on the margins of society and it was a mark of respect from me as the researcher. However, I followed NRC guidance and the final four participants agreed to engage in the interviews without the offer of the vouchers.

Altogether, I interviewed 20 adult male prison leavers, 17 of them twice. In the table below, there is a descriptive overview of the characteristics and positionalities of the participant sample.

Table 1*Background data of participants*

Participant pseudonym	Age	Ethnicity	Schooling	LDD	Employment status	Current residence
Ashley	Early 40s	British Asian (Mauritian heritage)	Mainstream co-ed	None declared	Fulltime employed	Living independently
Brett	Late 40s	White Irish	Multiple exclusions, Mainstream boys' school	None declared	Fulltime employed	Living independently
Cassie	Late 40s	White British	Mainstream co-ed	None declared	None, Universal Credit	Approved premises
Connor	Mid 50s	White Irish	Multiple exclusions, Mainstream co-ed	Dyslexia	None, Universal Credit	Approved premises
Doug	Early 50s	White British	Exclusion, Mainstream co-ed	Dyslexia, dyspraxia	Fulltime employed	Living independently
Freddie	Early 30s	Black British (Nigerian heritage)	Mainstream boys' school	None declared	Fulltime employed	Living independently

Table 1 (continued)

Background data of participants

Participant pseudonym	Age	Ethnicity	Schooling	LDD	Employment status	Current residence
Harry	Early 50s	White European	Fee-paying, all-boys	None declared	Carer for dependent	Family home
Joe	Early 50s	White British	Mainstream, co-ed	None declared	Fulltime student	Living independently
Joel	Late 20s	Mixed heritage, White British/Caribbean	Mainstream, co-ed	Dyslexia, schizophrenia, Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD)	None, Universal Credit	Approved Premises
Jo Jo	Mid 20s	Black British (Caribbean heritage)	Mainstream boys' school	None declared	Fulltime employed	Living independently
Martin	Late 20s	White British	Exclusion, Mainstream co-ed	ADHD	None, Universal Credit	Approved Premises
Matty	Late 20s	White British	Exclusion, mainstream	None declared	Fulltime student	Living independently

Table 1 (continued)

Background data of participants

Participant pseudonym	Age	Ethnicity	Schooling	LDD	Employment status	Current residence
Mike	Mid 30s	Mixed heritage Black British/Caribbean	Grammar school, boys' school	None declared	None, Universal Credit	Approved Premises
Obie	Early 30s	White British	Mainstream, co-ed	Autism, Tourette's syndrome	None, Universal Credit	Family home
Otis	Early 40s	White British	Fee paying, all-boys	None declared	Fulltime employed	Living independently
Reese	Early 40s	Asian British (heritage Indian)	Mainstream, co-ed	None declared	Fulltime employed	Living independently
Robert	Early 50s	White British	Exclusion, Mainstream co-ed	Autism	None, Universal Credit	Approved Premises
Ryan	Early 30s	White British	Language unit, Mainstream co-ed	None declared	None, Universal Credit	Approved Premises
Stuart	Late 40s	White British	Mainstream, co-ed	Dyslexia	None, Universal Credit	Approved Premises
Tom	Mid 40s	White British	Mainstream co-ed	None declared	Fulltime employed	Living independently

The ages of the 20 adult men interviewed ranged from mid-twenties to early fifties. In brief: six are people of colour, from different heritages; 12 are White British and two are from Southern Irish descent. Eight of the sample participants are from middle-class backgrounds, one from an upper-class background and 11 from working-class backgrounds. Categories of economic and social status such as occupation have been critiqued as blunt indices to understand an individual's social class, and it is acknowledged that myriad factors contribute to the constitution of an individual's social class and background (Vincent & Ball, 2007). This data was gathered by understanding a number of factors and beyond parents' and participants' current occupation. Although my main focus is on gender, an intersectional understanding is applied throughout this project and the diverse economic, racial and social backgrounds of participants has proven significant in understanding trajectories, navigation and identity work in diverse educational spaces.

Eight of the participants were still on parole at the time of the interview, and therefore further security clearances were needed in addition to my original application with the NRC. Ten of the participants at the time of the interview worked with prison leaver communities, in either paid or voluntary capacity. Two participants were also studying at HE level. Ten of the participants were in receipt of benefits, and of these four were actively looking for work, one was a carer for a family member and the remaining five were receiving Personal Independence Payment (PIP), a benefit that supports people living with disabilities or mental or physical health conditions.

All participants had a wide range of experiences in their schooling. Most attended mainstream, mixed primary and secondary schools in their local areas. Four entered fee-paying schools at secondary level or attended schools further away on account of parents' choice and request. Five participants attended boys' schools, and three of these schools were fee-paying. Ten of the participants self-identified as experiencing LDDs (dyslexia, dyspraxia, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), Tourette's syndrome, stutter) and nearly all participants within the sample discussed educational disengagement at some point in their lives. Compared to the prison population as a whole, the sample includes a higher proportion of men from affluent backgrounds and a higher prevalence of LDDs. The participant narratives reflect these points of disadvantage as being a central to their schooling difficulties

and adversities. It is generally accepted that people in prisons originate from the poorer sections of society (Ginn, 2013). The comparatively high proportion of people from middle-class backgrounds in this sample has also become an interesting point of analysis in revealing how people with economic, educational and social capital navigate institutions compared to those with fewer economic resources.

This pen sketch of participant characteristics, elaborated on and discussed in Chapters Six to Nine which explore the findings, is fundamental to understanding why I have used an interdisciplinary approach and an intersectional lens. A feminist poststructuralist, intersectional lens is used to analyse the gendered dimension of participants' identities and subjectivities, and offer a holistic understanding of how and why multiple axes of disadvantage affect the trajectories of men in the justice system. Reflections on gender, race, (dis)ability, social class, economic status, educational trajectories and violent histories present interwoven threads of lives generating complex narratives of hope, trauma and journeys of becoming.

Interview Preparation, Ethics and Methods

People who have been in prison have often experienced trauma, poverty and educational disengagement, so it was important to reflect in detail on how I would minimise any potential harm to research participants. Some interviews were to be conducted online, and some in person, and I therefore needed to confirm that robust measures were put in place to ensure that well-being checks were conducted before, during and after the interview and that the consent process was ongoing and meaningful. Although I decided against doing online interviews with participants in prison on account of not being able to ensure safeguarding and wellbeing, I decided that online interviews could be used with participants in the community. As the participants were able to communicate freely over email and by phone, I was better able to assess well-being and ensure confidentiality. I gained clearance from the Ministry of Justice's NRC and the UCL IOE research ethics committees for both my original in-person prison project in 2021 and the revised project to be carried out in the community in the months leading up to the start of my fieldwork in March 2022. (See Appendices B & C for both ethical clearance forms). I also completed various risk assessments for COVID-19 (see Appendix E). Although I no longer had to adhere to the many protocols of the prison setting – such as key handling and

physical security measures – safeguarding, anonymity, data management, informed consent and COVID-19 were important issues that needed to be addressed.

For in-person interviews with those living in Approved Premises (APs), I took time to talk through the information sheets and the consent forms (see Appendix F for consent forms, Appendix A for information sheets). Some participants liked the idea of a pseudonym and offered their nicknames acquired during prison. I decided against using these names as some revealed parts of their identities that I thought could compromise their anonymity. Some participants in the APs had experienced limited access to education in their formative years and one participant suggested that he had LDDs connected to dyslexia. I therefore asked for his support mentor to be present and for them to read through the consent form with him. I surmised that he would be more comfortable with a mentor and this worked well before our first interview. The online and hybrid interviews were conducted with those who were in fulltime employment and were busy with active lives post-prison. Many of these participants fitted me into their busy working days, either in their lunch hours or after work. I emailed the consent form and information sheet over to them before the interview, and asked them to read the information and ask any questions they may have before the interview began. I reiterated the key points to ensure that they understood their rights in the research process, especially that they were able to leave the research process if they wished, and also that we could stop the interview at any point if they felt unwell, upset or needed a break.

The NRC were keen to understand if I would ask the participants about their crimes. As my project focuses on their educational histories and capabilities, I had no reason to enquire about their criminal histories. I also knew from my experience of working in prisons that many people in prison do not want to talk about their crimes as these experiences can be a source of shame and trauma. While working within prisons, I had a policy in my classroom that criminal pasts would not be discussed and this was designed to ensure the well-being of all my students. A person's crime and the motivations behind are deeply personal matters, and I had no interest in pursuing this line of questioning. However, if participants wanted to talk about their histories in the space of the interview and I felt it related to the central themes of my project, then I would be an active listener. I also decided not to ask questions about traumatic childhoods or violence experienced as this would be upsetting for participants. However, again, if they volunteered the information, then I would of

course actively listen to participants' stories and ask follow-up questions if appropriate. Some participants took the opportunity to talk about their crimes and the violence experienced in their childhoods, schools, the street and prison at length, and therefore an interpretation of these narratives is featured throughout the findings chapters.

For those participants who discussed such sensitive issues, my strategy was to ensure that well-being checks would be used before, during and after the interview. Before the interview, I would ask questions to see how participants were doing and feeling in general that day. During the interview, I would stop if they appeared upset by a particular memory and check if they were okay to proceed. I would also change the line of questioning if one area appeared to be upsetting. After the interview, in the APs which housed the most vulnerable participants in this study, I planned to check with the staff that all participants who were interviewed were feeling and doing okay after the interviews. Checking with other members of staff on the wellbeing of a person in prison is a common safeguarding practice and members of staff were prepared to discuss issues if they arose.

The NRC also asked me to complete extra COVID-19 risk assessments in order to demonstrate that I had organised the environment and taken precautions to limit the spread of the virus. I ensured in all physical settings that we were sited next to an open window wherever possible. I ensured hand-gel was accessible, I offered a mask for the comfort of the participant and I continued to test throughout the days I was interviewing. Further ethical issues relate to the storing of data and how I would keep data secure. As I not conducting interviews in the secure setting of the prison, I was able to use a simple recording device to record the interviews. After the interviews, I immediately uploaded the data onto the UCL secure server and the original data was permanently deleted. In terms of my personal safety in the APs and while working with the interviewees I met in the community, I ensured that for the former a member of staff was close by, and for the latter, we met in a public place. I conducted most of the online interviews in my office and used teams or zoom for all the interviews. Both platforms guarantee safe, secure and confidential telecommunications. In all interview settings, including the interviews in public spaces, I ensured that we were in a quiet place where no one could overhear our conversations.

This section has outlined the various ethical and methodological areas I focused on before the fieldwork and in preparation for the fieldwork. The following sections, however, detail how I moved beyond the compliance feature of ethics, and focused more on the everyday challenges of mitigating against power struggles in the research process, using reflexivity as a tool to make these issues transparent (Cascant Sempere et al., 2022). One criticism from indigenous and decolonial scholars is that ethical concerns become a matter of compliance for some researchers, and that the daily struggles of a research project with vulnerable groups are not always carefully considered as the research unfolds, presenting challenges and power imbalances (Cascant Sempere et al., 2022). During the fieldwork, I kept a field diary to note any ethical dilemmas I navigated and how I used reflexivity as a tool to support transparency. These issues and dilemmas are noted and problematised in the following sections.

The interviews: Design and Purpose

Interviews are a common, versatile and productive methodological tool for qualitative researchers (Kvale, 2007). Used as a tool to collect data and understand the experiences of people in prison, methodologies have evolved in detailing the diverse ways of conducting the interview and reflecting on the data generated (Hollway & Jefferson, 2000). Feminist methodologies and insights are useful in addressing power imbalances in the interview, building trust and minimising negative consequences to the participants. I begin this section by charting the different methods discussed in the literature, weighing up the ways in which the interview is used as a research tool in both feminist and criminological methodologies. Following this, I detail the approach I decided to use, including the use of a topic guide and a series of interviews, rather than a standalone conversation.

Oakley (2000) argues that in-depth interviews are one of the central tools of feminist, qualitative analysis, promising active listening, connected knowledges and “dissolution of the artificial boundaries between knower and known, the opportunity to ground knowledge in concrete social contexts and experiences.” (Oakley, 2000, p. 47). DeVault and Gross (2012) in Hesse-Beber’s (2012) *Handbook of Feminist Research: Theory and Praxis* argue that “instead of telling what happened, researchers should examine the discourses at play and the subject ‘positions’ constructed by those discourses” (DeVault & Gross, 2014, p. 10). Riessman (2012)

further argues that the narrative interview, discursively situated, can offer a performative space where reparative work on “identities that have been spoiled by biographical disruptions” (p. 9) can be interpreted and understood discursively. They argue that there is an element of identity performance, negotiation and projection in the space of the interview but that “to emphasize the performative element is not to suggest that identities are inauthentic, only that they are situated and accomplished in social interaction” (Riessman, 2012, p. 9). This final reflection is a guiding principle in the interviews I conducted and subsequently analysed. I aimed to understand the participants’ positionings through the discourses available to them, and how their performativity was tied to this positioning - rather than suggest there is anything inauthentic about their experiences or the way they are accounting for them

Feminist researchers favour the semi-structured, open-ended, face-to-face interview technique (Oakley, 2000). However, research interviews in criminal justice settings have evolved in different ways. Siebert and Szczepanik’s (2016) study on prisoners’ desistance journeys used unstructured interviews; this method included avoiding questions until the end of the narration. The researchers found this technique allowed the respondents to depart from their ‘official biography’ which had been used in courts and with parole boards and police, etc., and instead allowed the narrators agency to construct their stories without consequence, reflect on significant relationships/events and engage in “a high level of reflective consciousness developed by the isolation in prison” (Szczepanik & Siebert, 2016, p. 293). Allowing the narrators to tell their stories uninterrupted allowed them to be reflective and make judgements on past decisions unhampered.

Elliot and Roberts (2020), whose study focused on the life narratives of two groups of young men, suggest on the other hand that using an unstructured interview where participants are expected to talk about their lives while the interviewer is mostly silent, resulted in uncomfortable, stilted silences in their interviews. They modified their approach accordingly. They explain: “We began to engage with participants’ narratives, tailor questions to suit their stories, personalities and narration styles” (Elliott & Roberts, 2020, p. 772) This more engaged approach “produced narratives about emotions, lives, thoughts and feelings that flowed more easily and freely” (Elliott & Roberts, 2020, p. 773). Evans and Wallace (2008) also argue that some people in prison may lack emotional and verbal fluency, and that support may be needed at certain points in the interview. As a former prison teacher,

I also felt that some prison leavers would need support to narrate their story, and listening in silence would not work well in terms of building rapport. Instead, showing engagement and interest in participants' stories and lives would begin a relationship of trust.

After weighing up feminist and criminological styles of interviewing, I decided to conduct semi-structured interviews using a topic guide (see Appendix D), and the use of open-ended questions. The topic guide followed a chronological structure, and I asked open ended questions beginning with their schooling, followed by prison, and their life post-release in the community. As stated in Chapter One, I have not focussed on transitions between school and prison as it is out of the bounds of this research. Feminist approaches to narrative interviews focus on the responsibility for ensuring that the risk of harm is minimised to participants, to be an active listener as well as using "a critical approach to informants accounts" (DeVault & Gross, 2014, p. 10). Knowledge is always co-constructed and is a linguistic project; the "listening shapes the account as well as the telling" (DeVault & Gross, 2014, p. 10). As part of a framework of accountability, I also decided on using a repeat interview method. Repeat interviews have historic roots in qualitative interviewing and are a widespread practice, especially for longitudinal studies (Goyes & Sandberg, 2024). The aim of the repeat interview is to generate reflexivity (Henderson et al., 2012) and ensure "more ethical research by making it easier for researchers to care for participants" (Goyes & Sandberg, 2024, p. 1). Goyes and Sandberg, in conducting repeat interviews with prisoners in Latin America, also recognised that repeat interviews are more resource-draining and may be limited by research funds and scope. In adopting this method, I decided on interviewing the participants twice, which was manageable within the remaining time available to complete the data-collection phase of my research project. This strategy allowed a return to any areas that were not covered in the first interview. I decided to keep notes on the participants' interview style during their first interview in order to better support them in the second. Further, the second interview provided a chance for me to ask any outstanding questions, pick up on points of interest, and, importantly, give participants an opportunity to feed back about their experience of being part of my research.

Surfacing the Role of the Researcher in the Interview: Power, Positionality and Insider Status

In qualitative feminist research, the role of the researcher is problematised and implicated in the research process, in contrast to positivist paradigms where the role is understood as a neutral observer (Denzin et al., 2023). Relations between the researcher and research participant should be examined, including whether positionalities have common ground, or are fundamentally different (Griffiths, 1998). An examination of intersubjectivity leads researchers to “focus on self-knowledge and sensitivity ... better understand the role of the self in the creation of knowledge.” (Berger, 2015, p. 220). Examining hierarchies and power imbalances as well as scrutinising the positionality of the researcher is central to feminist methodologies (Hesse-Biber, 2012). Hesse-Biber (2012) argues that feminist praxis centres on “the special attention given to issues of power, authority, reflexivity, ethics, and difference in the practice, writing, and reading of feminist research” (p. 20).

Being a White, female, middle-class woman who experienced a high standard of education and had previously taught in prisons, it was important to acknowledge how aspects of my positionality would affect the ethical dimension of the research and how I would build trust and rapport with participants. Prison researchers experienced in the field have suggested that reflexivity is a useful tool for navigating the complex field of the prison and negotiating positionalities. Reflexivity has been developed in feminist research by centring “personal experience, position, emotions...[and]...critically examining the research process in an attempt to explicate the assumptions about gender (and other oppressive) relations that may underlie the research project” (McHugh, 2020, p. 213). Reflexivity is a tool in which the positionality of the researcher, including insider/outsider status (Chavez, 2008; Maguire, 2021; Ramdeo, 2023), surfaces any power imbalances which should be scrutinised and reflected upon. It is useful in “its capacity to acknowledge researchers as active participants whose identities, like those of research subjects, may be variously shaped by powerful hierarchies of race/ethnicity, gender and class.” (Phillips & Earle, 2010, p. 362).

I found parts of my positionality useful in building trust and rapport, whereas other parts of my identity, such as my gender, caused ‘moments of trouble’, which I elaborate on below. I began the interviews by asking ‘settling in’ or ‘warming up’ questions and introducing myself. I found my partial insider status of being a former

prison teacher laid a firm foundation for building trust and rapport. The participants asked me which prisons I had taught in, and how I found teaching in prisons. Some participants viewed my introduction as a cue to begin their narratives by talking at length about prison education. Jewkes (2011) argues that “researchers devise strategies for distancing themselves from the discursive and symbolic practices of the prison staff when with inmate respondents and vice versa” (Jewkes, 2011, p. 67). In my fieldwork, I distanced myself from the punitive dimensions of institutional prison life, and, as much as possible, showed my sympathy towards the participants for enduring the traumatic experience of incarceration. For example, I asked those on parole how their recent experience of COVID-19 had been, and how they had coped with the many lockdowns, isolation and strict regimes enforced to limit the transmission of the virus. Demonstrating that I (partially) understood the pains of imprisonment as a former employee of the prison, seemed to support my credibility as someone who understood the significant challenges of imprisonment, and could therefore empathise, to a limited extent, with what they had been through.

In Liebling’s (2001) important article (*Whose side are we on?*) they problematise the role of the researcher in negotiating their value systems, researcher neutrality and engagement with participants’ struggles. They surmise that by forming a prudent, yet sympathetic engagement with the people we research, our praxis is strengthened by making transparent our understanding of the trauma and pains of imprisonment. “These values are in tension – but living with complexity is a more legitimate route to take than trying to control or eliminate it” (Liebling, 2001, p. 483). I argue that showing an understanding of the pains of imprisonment does not detract from the integrity of the researcher, but rather establishes trust with participants and demonstrates that the researcher has an understanding of their lived experience, rather than being a detached observer who is indifferent to their suffering.

Digressions, Silences and “Moments of Gender Trouble”

In the course of my fieldwork, I encountered ‘moments’ with participants which caused discomfort both for me and, potentially, the participant. Several prison researchers have drawn attention to the gendered dynamic of prison research and the methodological implications of a researcher’s gendered positionality (Crewe, 2014; Jewkes, 2011; Liebling, 2001). How do positionalities collide in the research space, and how does it impact gendered performances in the interview? Phillips and

Earle (2010) describe how in their joint research prison partnership their diverse positionalities led to differing intersubjective experiences of “gendered and racialized boundaries being erected in everyday life inside the prison” (Phillips & Earle, 2010, p. 366). Earl is a White man and Phillips is a Mixed-race woman. Phillips’ rapport with Black prisoners led to relaxed interviews where some participants began talking in Caribbean dialect enjoying a shared cultural heritage with the researcher. In other interviews, Phillips encountered power imbalances produced by her gender, where some participants treated the interview as a ‘date’ (Phillips & Earl, 2010). In other encounters, White officials treated Phillips with hostility and as if she was the subordinate, whilst addressing Earle with respect, despite the fact that he was her junior. They surmise that “race, class and gender always matter” and that it should not be surprising when encounters connected to positionality “are part of the research process, but nor should we refrain from actively interrogating them” (Phillips & Earl, 2010, p. 366).

Being a White, female teacher in adult male prisons, I already had experience of the potential gender dynamics that could arise with men in the prison complex. 54% of HMPPS workforce is female (HMPPS, 2023), and as stated previously, 96% of the prison population is male. During my time as a teacher, the vast majority of my students were respectful and appreciative, but on a few occasions lewd or inappropriate remarks were made and these occasional incidents were duly dealt with. As mentioned earlier, my *English through Cooking* course created an intimate space where the men in my class felt able to talk and I wondered if my gender had anything to do with this openness. Did my positionality as a woman allow for more emotional openness from my male students, were they able to drop the ‘mask’ of masculinity more easily with me because I am a woman? During the interviews, in my field diary, I found myself asking similar questions. As described in detail in Chapter Seven, Stuart was one such participant that seemed interested in me as a female researcher; he appeared interested in my opinion of him (especially his appearance) and talked openly about his many relationships with mostly younger women, his feelings about romantic relationships in the present and was particularly open about his ageing body that he felt frustrated with. It became clear in the first interview however that Stuart was not interested in talking about education. He tried to avoid and evade expansion on questions relating to his education, and would answer in short sentences and quickly change the subject to one of his topic

preferences. At the beginning of the first interview, he began telling me about his latest crime before he had introduced himself to me, before he had even sat down, and was particularly concerned about a large scar on his cheek and how it looked to others. In Chapter Seven, I describe in detail how Stuart's insecurities spilled into the interview space and nearly took over the interview at many points. Using feminist poststructuralist understandings of identity work and negotiation, Stuart's masculine subjectivity appeared under threat by his ageing body, and he used the space of the interview to work through his place in the world as a formerly tough and violent man who now grapples with mental and physical health conditions. During both interviews, Stuart solicited compliments, reassurance and at times, affection from me and, of course, his needs could not be met.

In methodological terms, it is epistemologically significant to understand the role I played in Stuart's identity work. Riessman (2012) argues that digressions, although frustrating for the researcher at the time of the interview, upon analysis, can offer windows of insight into a participant's motivations, fears and identity-construction strategies. Stuart was not interested in discussing education as it held little meaning for him in his life and therefore held little significance to his identity work. He had left school with untreated LDDs and had struggled to re-engage with learning since that time. Stuart invested his time in a hedonistic lifestyle, multiple sexual relationships, violent encounters and, of course, spent time in prison. He was interested in talking about these experiences with me as this served to negotiate his identity in the past and present. As a (relatively) young woman, Stuart wanted to understand if he still appeared attractive and tough; this was a more interesting endeavour for him in the interview than discussing education

Using a Butlerian lens, Morison and Macleod (2013) argue that narrators face moments of 'gender trouble' when they appear to occupy either a contradictory or undesirable identity position which conflicts with the author's linear gender performances derived from heteronormative categories. When participants engage in inconsistent positioning, which includes negatively valued social identities, reparative work is needed to smooth over the slippage in their performances. Morison and Macleod (2013) describe gender performances that require "specific re/enactments of gender within particular contexts, including those that may cause ruptures in the sanctioned gender scripts and, over time, serve to change these" (Morison & Macleod, 2013, p. 570). They describe these ruptures as "moments of trouble" (p.

570) in narratives, where the gender slip occurs, the mask drops and gender categories tied to bodies and behaviours unravel. Stuart's digressions away from education, and his dogged focus on his failing body and mind disrupted his previous discursive and heteronormative positioning as a lothario and tough, violent man. His reassurance-seeking positioned me as a "sexualised gender subject" (Phillips & Earle, 2010, p. 367) where the interview was used as an opportunity for Stuart to negotiate, project and understand his evolving gendered subjectivity.

Moments of Distress: The Limits of Well-being Checks and Managing Upset in Interviews

My field diary is mostly filled with reflections on the insightfulness of the narratives and the moments of trouble detailed above, but I also reflected on the moments of my anxiety and participant distress in the interviews. I worried about the participants who became demonstrably upset and how they experienced the interviews in the retelling of their biographies. Although well-being checks are a useful strategy in checking-in with participants, it is not always obvious whether someone in an interview has been upset by what they have disclosed. Biographies and recounting the past was difficult for a number of participants. Capturing formative schooling experiences was important to developing an understanding of how the participants' subjectivities were shaped in childhood. Devine (2004) argues, in reference to their fieldwork about class and educational trajectories, that "by talking to the interviewees about their early lives first of all, I was able to get a sense of how they had drawn on family resources before they entered the labour market" (Devine, 2004, p. 13). It was important for me to understand how past experiences connected to present day engagement, and so a methodology which would sensitively explore the past was essential. However, eliciting memories about school stirred up strong emotions on a number of key themes including family trauma, bullying, poverty and exclusion.

One participant, Cassie, was visibly upset when recounting the bullying, violence and mental health trauma he had experienced as a child and adult (see Chapter Six). His voice broke twice, and one of those times he was on the verge of tears. I stopped each time and asked him if he was okay to proceed; I asked him if he would like to move on to a different subject; I asked questions about his recovery; I moved on from sensitive subjects allowing him to return to them if he wished, which

he often did in his own time. As stated previously, consent forms and information sheets stipulated that follow up checks would be carried out. However, with other participants, it was less obvious whether or not they had been upset by what they had disclosed. I found it hard to contact Doug after our first interview to set up a second interview. He had talked candidly about his childhood including recalling being a “scruffy kid” with unmet LDDs with some teachers secretly helping him with handouts including second hand clothes, and others turning a blind eye to his truancy and struggles. After a few emails, I detected that he was very busy with work, but I also began to worry that he did not want to participate in a second interview with me and that the interview had upset him somehow. I had drafted an email to remind him that he could withdraw from the interview. Within the same week, Doug contacted me to set up our second interview and was generous and candid enough to share that he had been hesitant to talk with me again, and how he felt after the first interview:

I felt a bit [pause] after the interview [pause] some of it was like, it was repeating on me like a like an awful meal [pause] it's not about you [pause] it's something that I've been uncomfortable with and trying to resolve for some time, you know, it partly felt disempowering in some ways.

Doug talked about how, although he believes in sharing his story for research and to make things better for people in prison, it was still difficult to share and reveal so much of himself. He went on to say,

I suppose it's like anything ... perhaps we kind of reveal stuff about ourselves it leaves us... [pause]... especially the spaces I suppose that we come from, it leaves us feeling a little bit vulnerable, and I'm not comfortable with that vulnerability.

I appreciated Doug's honesty and candidness about his hesitancy. He appeared confident, articulate and mostly matter-of-fact when retelling his story and he did not *appear* to express vulnerability in the first interview. This demonstrates that the ethical checks can only be effective to an extent, as we never know what another person is truly thinking or feeling.

Another participant that struggled with recounting painful childhood memories was Matty. I opened our second interview by asking him about his family expectations around his education, as I realised our conversation had moved away from this in the first interview. He hesitated and said he felt his Mum did have high

expectations in terms of behaviour, and that she did want the best for him. This opening question seemed strange to Matty. The question appeared to trigger painful memories from his past and he began recounting the struggles his Mum had with alcohol and how it resulted in his neglect:

AM: How is your Mum now?

Matty: She's good. She's great. She's great. That's what I like... I always feel bad. Like whenever I'm talking about something that, like, I have to sort of mention that... I was feeling bad because she did that... She did. She went like, she went really sort of bad for probably like seven or eight years, something like that. But now she's great... so yeah. Yeah, I couldn't. I couldn't and I wouldn't fault her.

AM: Yeah. Yeah.

Matty: Thing is... she was just doing the best that she could at the time she had her own stuff from being a kid. You know, trauma and things like that, uh, she didn't know then what I know now. Well, I know now, you know. So, it's just, it's just, uh, it was just a situation that's all.

Matty articulated his feelings about his Mum and they were a mixture of guilt, sadness and pain from his past. He now has a good relationship with his Mum in the present day and he appeared to feel guilt for disclosing the difficult past they both endured. Even though my question was related to expectations around education, it fed into wider web of emotion, memory and complexity, and Matty seemed to be emotionally affected by answering this question.

These episodes or 'moments of distress', connected to recounting biographies in the interview, highlight the importance of the 'ongoingness' of the research process (Ramdeo, 2023). Engaging in a series of interviews has been key in unravelling these complex emotions by giving participants the space to feed back on their first interviews and how it felt for them to recount difficult parts of their narratives. Recounting difficult memories from the past can impact participants differently, even if they do not show outward signs of being upset, clues can be detected in the language and how they account for a loved one's neglect, or perhaps being distant in the lead up to a further interview. My approach avoided so-called 'helicopter research', which is critiqued for its extractivism, being characterised by the researcher disappearing after collecting the data from participants after one-off interviews, and also vanishing without sharing their findings (Fleschenberg et al., 2023). I have endeavoured to counter these critiques by being transparent about the imperfectness of the semi-structured interviews, and as with dissemination of my

findings, I will continue to include research participants in ongoing research to create better outcomes for people experiencing the justice system.

Location of the Interviews: Visual Cues to the Journey of Desistance

The interviews took place in varied locations, and in this section it is important to analyse how the diverse physical spaces gave me insight into a participants' desistance journey and level of comfort. For prison leavers who had recently been released, the interviews were partially supervised and took place in communal settings on the premises of partner organisations. For participants living independently in the community, I endeavoured to be as accommodating as possible, in recognition of the fact that they were giving up their time and energy for my project; I therefore offered either a physical meet in a location of their choice, or to meet online. I surmised that participants would feel most comfortable in a space of their choosing. I interviewed eight participants in person, eight online, and four using hybrid methods (once online and once in person). I interviewed 17 participants twice, and three participants only once due to logistical constraints relating to the organisations. For prison leavers who were being supported by the housing organisation, the interviews took place in a communal space in the AP and were partially supervised by staff in the adjacent room. For prison leavers being supported by the education organisation, the interview took place in a small office next to the main classroom. As I have already stated, online interviews were conducted mostly with participants who were working or studying fulltime, and were held either in their homes or at work during lunchtime breaks. I ensured that I was in the confidential space of my office, and implicitly allowed them to risk assess the confidentiality of the space they were in for the interview.

The physical environment where I interviewed the participant offered visual cues to the level of comfort the participants were experiencing post-prison, and gave an indication of how the task of engaging with education and work in the community was for them. Some of those in fulltime work were in comfortable homes, with pictures of their families visible on the walls behind them, and one participant spoke to me from his garden office. The participants in the APs, however, were in basic surroundings with few possessions to call their own, and, as Chapter Nine discusses, it was harder for them to re-engage with education and work. The environment of the interviews also denoted the place of the participants in their

journeys to desistance. Some participants who were in their comfortable homes, I soon learnt from their narratives, had once been in an AP and struggled with drugs, trauma and poverty post-release from prison. Part of the privilege of this project was being able to interpret educational narratives and highlight how participants overcame sometimes extreme structural disadvantage to move away from crime, and live a more flourishing life.

I interviewed one research participant, Doug, who was originally from a deprived council estate in the North of England, in the town in which he currently lives in the south of England. It was a nice day so we decided to sit in an outdoor café and conduct the interview over a coffee. The view behind the participant was a stunning backdrop of historic buildings, a beautiful green park and signs of affluence were abundant. Doug began recounting his story by describing the estate he grew up on. Crime was endemic and the struggles of everyday poverty were a common feature of family life. He described his childhood from the 1970s in detail – poverty, exclusion and unmet learning needs – yet the man in front of me in this cafe seemed far away from such humble beginnings. This contrast between the visual cues of the physical setting and the participant's biography and positionality, could almost satisfy a neoliberal line of progression and notions of success, that if you work hard enough on your education, you will succeed (Apple, 2009). However, Doug's narrative poignantly described his navigation of structural barriers and how several axes of disadvantage had obstructed his path out of poverty. Although a lot of hard work is central to his story, Doug's narrative demonstrates that navigating structural disadvantage is far more complicated and messier than the neoliberal notion of success portrays. A linear 'rags to riches' is a myth, and it is through understanding the lived experiences of people from marginal spaces that we can begin to understand journeys out of poverty to comfortable more flourishing lives.

Analysing Lives

James (2017) argues that narrative inquiry suffers from a dearth of specific methodological tools for analysing narratives once researchers have collected the data, especially regarding how to navigate a "maze of approaches" (p. 3103) in qualitative research for moving from raw data to co-constructed narratives. Squire and colleagues (2008) write: "What do I do with the stories now I've got them?" Narrative data can easily seem overwhelming: susceptible to endless interpretation,

by turns inconsequential and deeply meaningful” (Squire et al., 2008, p. 2). I began analysing the interviews early on during the fieldwork stage and I was influenced by using diverse approaches as the data analysis process unfolded. I recorded each interview on a simple recording device; I transcribed 30 of the interviews, and I hired a professional transcriber to transcribe the final 7 transcripts.

Although at times, it was overwhelming, I found following Riessman’s (Riessman, 2012, p.5) principles of narrative analysis helpful to anchor my analysis on several key points in the early stages:

1. Presentation of and reliance on detailed transcripts of interview excerpts
2. Attention to language use and other structural features of discourse
3. Analysis of the coproduction of narrative (including ‘digressions’) through the dialogic exchange between interviewer and participant
4. A comparative approach to interpreting the similarities and differences among participants

In the first instance, I began with a close reading of each transcript, making notes and recording emerging themes and patterns, as well as highlighting standout excerpts. This was my starting point in navigating, organising and moving beyond surface analysis of the transcripts. I also used my field diary as a further tool to interpret the data and exchanges, paying particular attention to my reflections on digressions and silences in the interviews. Evans and Wallace (2008) argue that generating themes in analysing narratives is also a “mysterious” process, but recommends “pawing through texts” and “simply underlining key phrases” (Evans & Wallace, 2008, p. 491). I was influenced by aspects of Braun and Clarke’s (2022) thematic analysis method, and I used SharePoint to organise the data and code into conceptual, temporal and thematic categories pertaining to the research aims. This encompassed both predetermined and emergent, ‘open’ codes that were noted as the data analysis process proceeded. Examples of the predetermined codes included “masculinities”, “social class” or “educational processes” and derived from the literature review. Open codes were noted as areas emerging from the data. In these cases, I attempted to use the wording of participants, such as “family guy” or “The Jungle”. I decided to use temporal locations of “school”, “prison” and “community” as overarching organisation markers and I was able to see the commonalities and differences in the different life stages. It was at this point in the

data analysis process, on a second, third and sometimes fourth reading of each transcript, that the theme of violence emerged repeatedly in participants' narratives and in all life stages. I began to map four empirical chapters – schooling, prison, the community and violence.

Overall, I found the process of coding both time-consuming, informative and frustrating. Although it helped to highlight key passages, emerging themes, similarities and contrasts in the transcripts in response to a series of existing and emerging codes, I also found it took key moments and insights out of the context of participants' lives. Carlsson (2013) argues that thematic analysis is a “fragmented way of analysing life-history narratives...[that]...may make the extracts devoid of meaning” (p. 671). He decided to reanalyse each transcript within its wider narrative context. He remarks: “As part of the interpretive process, the meaning of an extract could be deepened by interpreting it in relation to the life-history narrative as a whole (Carlsson, 2019, p. 671). It was important that the participants' different life stages were not siloed in my analysis but the themes were interweaved and presented as a continuation of the inequalities, adversity and (dis)advantages that participants' experienced, especially in childhood. Most significantly, early life experiences were foregrounded in adult time spent in prison and the community, and these formative experiences were centred as I began to unravel the intersecting and interlocking adversities that beset participants' lives.

In terms of Riessman's second point on language, I felt a more granular approach was needed so that I could comprehend participants' emerging subjectivities in educational spaces, especially focussing on the intersectional inequalities evident in their experiences and how they positioned themselves in relation to power differentials. At this point in the analysis, I drew upon Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis (FDCA) (Lazar, 2005) for a deeper examination of how participants' were positioning themselves in relation to the gendered discursive practices that shaped their lives, and how education featured in the destabilising or establishment of identities. Lazar (2005) suggests, “The task of feminist CDA is to examine how power and dominance are discursively produced and/or resisted in a variety of ways through textual representations of gendered social practices, and through interactional strategies of talk.” (p.10). Through a FCDA lense, I returned to key episodes in participant narratives and delved deeper into the relations of power

that shaped and re-shaped subjectivities and the resources drawn upon to enact agency, or explore what constrained participants' further.

Conclusion

This chapter has mapped my methodological approach and given an account of how the data collection process transpired in the field, being transparent about the ethical dilemmas and struggles I planned for and encountered. Using a qualitative, narrative approach I have demonstrated how I used reflexive tools and feminist praxis to surface the importance of positionality and how my gender and background influenced the research process. I have also charted the obstacles I faced during fieldwork, including the COVID-19 pandemic, and have offered commentary on how I worked through the institutional, ethical and environmental issues that I eventually navigated and overcame. By deciding to move on from the ethnographic dimension of my in-prison research, I was able to meet with and interview prison leavers in the community. This added richness and depth to the narrative data in terms of participants' desistance journeys, and offered scope to generate data and provide analysis relating to another gap in the literature – the gendered and educational trajectories of prison leavers post-prison.

This chapter has offered key insights into the feminist and narrative methodology employed in the research and has captured how the people I interviewed communicated their life stories so candidly and generously, though not without struggle. I have also aimed to uncover the strategies used by participants in the interviews to construct and reconstruct identities, and how my positionality influenced this identity work and shaped gender subjectivities further. I have reflected on my positionality and how my partial insider status as a former prison teacher helped to build trust and rapport. However further aspects of my positionality, being a (relatively) young woman appeared problematic (with one interviewee in particular) and this added a further layer of complexity on the identity work they were engaging in. Managing upset in the narratives with well-being checks alone did not serve to mitigate distress, rather, follow up interviews where participants could reflect on their experiences appeared more productive.

I have offered insights on the diverse physical settings the interviews took place in, and how the visual signs of the participant's present-day comfort did not

always match the difficult stories of the past. Finally, I have offered an overview of the data analysis strategies I used to organise, map and interpret the data, and have offered critiques on techniques that fell short of the depth of analysis needed to interpret the richness of the data. The following Chapters Six – Nine offer the empirical findings of this study, and analyse how gender subjectivities and educational capabilities shape life journeys toward, through and beyond the prison gate. I argue the narratives analysed in the following sections do not reflect a linear and neoliberal ‘rags to riches’ trajectory from poverty to present day comfort. Rather, participant narratives reflect the “zig zag” path away from crime (Albertson et al., 2022, p. 159) revealing the multiple structural barriers they negotiated, and for some, overcame.

Chapter Six: Educational Disengagement and the Shaping of Gender Subjectivities in Schooling

Introduction

This chapter begins by mapping participants' educational journeys in their early lives and exploring the key features of prison leavers' educational experiences, offering intersectional insights into the complexity that surrounds the shaping of gender subjectivity. I draw attention to the complex and multidimensional ways educational disengagement manifests in schooling and how discourses of gender, class, (dis)ability and race are implicated in the structural and educational inequalities experienced by participants. I begin by identifying key features of participants' educational experiences including disruptive behaviours, relations with teachers, peer dynamics, truanting, exclusion and the experience of (un)met needs connected to Learning Disabilities and Differences (LDDs) in the classroom. Although there are many commonalities amongst participants, there are distinct differences in terms of the support, interventions and penalties they experienced from adults in their formative educational trajectories, and this is meaningful for gender construction as well as their capabilities in and through education in the present and future.

After settling in questions, I began the interview by asking participants the question, "What are your memories of school?" This led participants to share information about their childhoods as well as schooling experiences and offered a complex view of the struggles that many faced in their formative years. The following section has been divided into the diversity of difficulties that participants talked about in their interviews. The issues are loosely grouped into academic, social and personal struggles, however, some of the participants struggled with overlapping constraints. Others struggled with relatively few adversities, yet all, apart from one participant, experienced some form of educational disengagement. Many of the features relating to gender subjectivity discussed in the following analysis can be understood through the lens of the school-to-prison-pipeline (STPP) discussed in Chapter Two, and this chapter will discuss how participants' experiences of intersectional disadvantage relate to the literature as a whole.

Introducing “The Unteachable”: ‘Impossible Learners’ and Inequality of Educational capabilities

In the sample of 20 prison leavers, I identified only one learner who enjoyed school and did not report any struggle with school-based practices, peer dynamics or a troubled homelife. Joe is the archetypal ‘ideal learner’ (Bradbury, 2013), compliant with school practices and excelling academically. He recalls being good at sports, especially rugby, as well as being in the top sets for maths and English. Central to the construction and maintenance of a hegemonic, middle-class masculine identity is the crafting of an intellectual identity that espouses natural intelligence, rather than working hard (Francis, 2009), as well as being good at sports (Swain, 2006). Joe describes coming from a family of teachers and being supported with his homework and learning; he acknowledged, “I did have those life chances, I did have a good background.” Joe did not position himself in a problem or deficit discourse; he was simply able to enjoy his education and flourish. Conversely, the other 19 participants in this cohort did struggle with varying levels of educational disengagement with six participants experiencing multiple levels of structural inequality that contributed to their eventual exclusion from school.

Many participants began their narrative by recalling academic struggles and educational disengagement, including issues with classroom-based practices, describing the tensions and conflict in their schooling and educational trajectories. This section begins by discussing the classroom experiences of participants and how their educational disengagement influenced the shaping of emerging gender subjectivity. For some participants, their emerging gender subjectivity in the school space centred around performing protest or resistance identities (Connell, 2005). These performances were mostly informed by a discourse of resistance to authority and negotiating a hegemonic masculine position in the social hierarchy of schooling, chiefly emulating the laddish ‘class clown’ or performing ‘hard’ or tough masculine identities. As described in Chapter Three, boys from working-class communities are more likely to perform their identities through disruptive behaviours, and are more likely to experience exclusion and exclusionary practices during their schooling. This is reflected in the experiences of participants from White working-class backgrounds in this study. Six participants were permanently excluded from school, which resembles the prison population overall of 42% (Coates, 2016) however sharply contrasting to the general population which is below 1% (S. Ellis, 2024). Five of

those permanently excluded from school were from White working-class backgrounds and one from a mixed heritage White and Black Caribbean working-class background. The reasons for disengagement and disruptive behaviours were varied and I discuss each area in terms of the educational experiences of the participants and what they chose to talk about in their narratives. As the following sections will illustrate, although there are commonalities as well as nuances between participants, their trajectories differed, on the whole, in terms of the adult support and intervention they received and this made a difference to the subjectivities of participants. It was particularly evident in terms of their feelings of belonging in the school space, how they perceived themselves as learners, their emerging gender subjectivities and the place for education in their futures.

Learning Difficulties and Disabilities (LDDs), Social Class and Emergent Gender Subjectivities

As discussed in Chapter Two, young people with learning disabilities are more likely to experience the STTP (Kim et al., 2021). 50% of the participants in the sample describe experiencing an LDD, which is higher than the proportion of individuals of the prison population who experience LDDs, with about 30% of prisoners self-identifying upon entry to prison (Education Committee, 2022a). This section discusses participants Martin and Doug, who are White and from working-class backgrounds, and Obie and Ryan, who are also White but from middle-class backgrounds. Martin and Doug are 30 years apart in age but had similar experiences of LDDs in the classroom; neither received support or help during their formative years of schooling. Instead, they describe being excluded from the classroom, and for Doug, eventually, the school community altogether. The labelling practices that they were subjected to and the discourses in which they understood themselves will be discussed in relation to the emergence of a tough masculine subjectivity as well as the foreclosure of educational capability. Conversely, Obie and Ryan are from more affluent backgrounds and describe intervention, advocacy and support for diagnosis and treatment for their LDDs. The adult support changed the course of their educational pathways and they were able to re-engage and develop educational capabilities.

Doug describes navigating school in the 1970s in a post-industrial city in England. He explains how he struggled in the classroom with unmet needs

connected to ADHD, dyslexia and dyspraxia. He reflected “I was always fidgeting. I was always active”. He recalled his struggle with concentration in the classroom and being unable to do what was expected of him. He suggested that in any classroom today, his needs would have a higher chance of being recognised, but four decades ago, “there was no approach to teaching that could make me feel in any way good about myself or my ability.” Doug soon began to disengage and truant after being sent out of the classroom multiple times; he began entering into low level criminality on the estate where he grew up. Doug simply reflected that school became a “relationship of convenience” between him and his teachers, who would openly acknowledge his truanting and would not attempt to dissuade him. He recalls them asking him at lunchtime, “You weren't in this morning, Mr [name] and you won't be in this afternoon, I take it?” There was a generally low expectation around his and his peers' educational outcomes from the teachers and his behaviours consequently became more and more disruptive. He suggested he was “open” to learning in Year 8, but ultimately disengaged soon after. Following his exclusion after a number of suspensions, Doug left school without GCSEs.

Martin is a 28-year-old White British man who described how he had struggled with undiagnosed ADHD most of his life. In 2021, a full psychological screening was carried out in a secure unit for drug rehabilitation. Navigating his way through school with an unrecognised and undiagnosed LDD was “difficult.” Martin described that when he did not understand a learning point, he would then not receive additional help, and would resort to being disruptive. In recalling the episodes of his isolation and exclusion, he adopted the viewpoint of the teacher and then switched to his perspective:

And then the teacher would basically see it as I've got 29 children in a classroom who want to learn and one that's being disruptive... and instead of addressing my problems, I was just excluded from the classroom.

Martin recalls how he would refuse to do something that was not stimulating to him, and instead he would play with a toy or object that he found more interesting. The teacher would become exasperated by his behaviour and shout: “Will you just stop?” Asking for help and not receiving it in his school days had a direct effect on the shaping of Martin's gender subjectivity. He described his behaviours connected to exclusion from the classroom as “avoidance, defiance, not listening, sulking, suppressing anger.” A recurring theme in Martin's school narrative is how he would

ask for help and would never receive it, so he became more determined not to ask for help as time went on:

We won't ask for help because there's been times in my life where I have asked and we don't get the help, so therefore there's an egotistical side – "I'm never asking for help again". I'll just struggle, you know. And obviously I've been there, multiple times.

This attitude reflects a tough working-class masculinity that is characterised by self-reliance, stoicism, pride (Ingram & Waller, 2014) and a repression of emotion (de Viggiani, 2012). Unhealthy masculine behaviours have been implicated in crime trajectories (Messerschmidt, 2005) and Martin's pathway to crime reflects this. By his mid-teens, Martin was addicted to cocaine and he describes how his difficulties with school were implicated in drug taking. He recalled:

So obviously you could go into a classroom knowing from previous experience that you're not going to get help. What you do throughout the lesson, you're gonna end up getting excluded anyway. So much of the time I'd just go and smoke a spliff and wait until lunchtime.

He described how being excluded and being labelled as an "underachiever" resulted in unhealthy emotions. He began to feel that attempting to be part of the class would more than likely lead to another exclusion, so he did not bother trying and would instead truant and misuse drugs. Based on Martin's recollections, it is clear that there is a relationship between the enactment of destructive masculine behaviours and the exclusionary practices he experienced, pathologisation as an excluded Other and labelling as, in his words, "an underachiever". Exclusionary practices and his struggles in the classroom influenced his decision to misuse drugs at school, and this behaviour represented a way of finding an outlet for his pent-up anger and living with educational stigma. Martin was never permanently excluded and he was able to sit his GCSEs. He joked, "you can spell DUDE with my GCSE results." Although Martin was an engaging storyteller and often made me laugh when recounting his experiences, it was clear that being positioned within a deficit discourse, as an "underachiever", was a difficult experience that contributed to destructive behaviours and emotional suppression, anger and drug-taking. The genesis of the shaping of Martin's gender subjectivity began in experiencing the exclusionary practices of school and he is candid about the emergence of a tough masculinity and the detrimental effect it had on him.

The next part of this section focuses on Obie and Ryan, two participants from middle-class backgrounds. Obie is in his early thirties and reports that he was diagnosed with autism at 12 years old and also has Tourette's syndrome. He begins his narrative in a similar way to the participants above:

I was always off-task and this, that and the other... the teachers never asked me why I was always off-task. Because with 29 other kids in the class then you're not going to get the kind of, the attention, that you need.

Obie reports early indications of autism, including learning to speak at 3 years old and also struggling with learning in a classroom environment. He says he was labelled "disobedient" and struggled with concentration. However, the difference with Obie's educational trajectory compared to the others described above is that his mother was a teacher, then a deputy head and finally an Ofsted inspector, and he had her support to advocate for him in the school setting. He recalled: "So she clearly knows what it is she's talking about. And so, was quite able just to go to the teacher and say 'this is wrong, what's going on here?'" Obie described how his mother advocated for him periodically and, if a problem arose, she would speak to the teachers and find strategies and solutions for Obie so that his behaviours would not affect his capability to participate. Obie was eventually able to get a statement and a diagnosis of Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) that would release funding to support him in the mainstream setting. He was able to concentrate on his work using various learning strategies and he completed his GCSEs achieving Bs and Cs. Obie's capability to participate was secured through his mother's advocacy and he was then able to fully engage.

Ryan, is another White British participant from a middle-income background who was supported with an LDD. He is also in his early thirties and his narrative begins with his memory of attending a Language Unit as an infant to learn how to speak. In this opening description, Ryan stressed that he was "brilliantly clever" from infancy and it becomes clear from the beginning of the interview that he is uncomfortable with positioning himself within the discourse of (dis)ability. Ryan's narrative was fragmented in places and he would gloss over significant life changes in his childhood, and instead delve into long explanations about technical aspects of subjects he enjoyed (e.g. how to process film, how to learn French). When I attempted to ask follow up questions on issues connected with his schooling, he would change the subject again. When I enquired how he had settled into

mainstream schooling after “special school”, he described himself as “the leader of the playground” and the “decision-maker”. He also describes finding ways to “make fun of the other kids” and not get into trouble for it, as he knew sign language unlike the other children in the mainstream setting. He stated that school was not challenging enough for him and he was often bored, and he achieved five Cs at GCSE despite not revising. When I asked why he did not revise, he mentioned that he had been sent to live with his Gran at the age of 14 due to “legal reasons” and he had “a lot on his plate.” He did not want to talk about it further and he then started talking about the best way to learn a foreign language again. He also mentioned his friendship group at school, and described how they would all eat lunch in the “special needs” room, only because it was “nice in there.” It seemed at times that Ryan strived to perform a learner identity compatible with hegemonic middle-class masculinity, which is characterised by natural intelligence, effortless intellect and rationality (Mac an Ghaill, 1996), although the outcomes of his schooling did not necessarily reflect this identity description.

Ryan’s gender identity appeared unstable at other times during the interview. He also positioned himself as a “lad”; a masculine identity position taken up by boys who are excluded and use these behaviours to gain power in educational settings (see Chapter Three). I wondered if Ryan’s experience of school had led him to be insecure about his intellect and popularity status. At many points in the interview, he would position himself as being respected by others for his rationality and knowledge in different areas, rather than as a person with LDDs additional needs who had experienced a challenging start in life. Gender subjectivity for middle-class men is often formed by performing intellectuality and rationality. Ryan often described himself in the interview as “very clever”; “too good for that job” (pot wash in prison); “really intimidating to others”; “very quick” at learning IT systems and also recalls other inmates asking for pointers on how to be more like him – “rational and calm.” Ryan projected masculine signifiers of calmness and rationality, physical impressiveness and “laddish” behaviours at school, which are historically working-class male signifiers that can be appropriated by middle-class men to position themselves as hegemonic (Phipps, 2017b), rather than in a subordinate discourse of “specialness”. I did not, however, get a strong feeling that Ryan was in fact the “leader of the playground”, but instead he was in a subordinate and excluded position due to his troubled start in education, and his current excluded status in

society as a convicted sex offender. Ryan talked candidly about his crime and being in prison for sexual offences and described a strong sense of belonging during his time in prison on the VPU (Vulnerable Persons Unit). The most vulnerable people in prison are sex offenders (Maguire, 2019), as this crime violates the prisoner code (Sabo et al., 2001), which is a set of social values and rules for adult men in prison (one of the rules condemns paedophilia), and it appeared that Ryan was using his narrative to convince me that he was not vulnerable or excluded, but instead popular, well-liked, clever and in a position of power. He transmutes the VPU from a place of exclusion to a place of belonging, and describes it as a “fraternity” where he felt he belonged.

The School-to-Prison-Pipeline (STPP): Race, Resistance and Struggles with Teachers

Although many participants talked with empathy and respect about their school teachers, many also talked about discriminatory and violent practices that I interpret as additional contributory factors in the shaping of their emergent masculine identities, informed by a discourse of protest and resistance to authority. The experiences of participants in this section resemble key features of the STPP, especially in relation to the conduct of teachers.

Mike is Mixed Black Caribbean and White British from a working-class background and does not report any LDDs. He comments that he particularly enjoyed maths and English at school and on the whole he was a confident, able learner but sometimes struggled to understand the learning aims. He attended an all-boys grammar school in a predominately White middle-class small town in England. He described his struggles at school mostly in terms of altercations with teachers and what he perceived as unfair classroom-based practices. Mike recalled that if he struggled to understand a lesson point, in certain subjects and usually the ones he did not enjoy, he would then begin to “play up” when he did not receive help:

You struggle in class and mainly you don't get like the help you need... just playing up because they're not getting the attention they need... they don't understand something teachers are just doing “duh duh duh” on the board.... But then you haven't like explained anything to me... and like, there are 30 people in the class, and only 20 understand, the other ten are like... it was almost like, ‘Why don't you understand? You're not listening, you're not doing this or that kind of thing.’ And we're like ‘What?! I don't understand!’

Mike explained how “playing up” resulted in being sent out of class for being disruptive, “and then you fall even more behind.” He describes being sent to the isolation room – “no more than 5 times in my entire time at school” – but enough times to leave a lasting impression. The isolation room appeared to be an unproductive space where he and his fellow excluded peers would not be given any work to do, and would be forced to sit in silence. Similar to Doug and Martin’s experiences above, being excluded from class impacted his ability to participate in education and learn. Mike described the stigma attached to being a “naughty boy” and how he struggled with certain teachers, especially those who were physically violent to the boys in the single-sex grammar school he attended. He said: “Mr. [name] and Mr. [name], they were terrible like, and I’ve seen... students being assaulted by the police... [*corrects himself*] not police, teachers, teachers... and nothing has come of it.”

Mike mistakenly refers to violent teachers as violent police officers. This slip could infer an association of authority figures (e.g. teachers or police) with abusive power dynamics. It could engender a type of anti-authority protest masculinity where working-class young men butt against authority in situations of powerlessness (Connell, 2005). In this example, Mike’s resistant narrative appears to be directed towards male teachers but suggests he has also had difficulties with police officers in the past. However, Mike also talks at length about caring (mostly female) teachers who supported him to excel in subjects he enjoyed, like his English teacher: “Some teachers, they would engage, instead of kicking you out of the class.” He describes how he went from the middle range ability to the highest set under the guidance of his English teacher. He also talks at length about enjoying a range of subjects including maths, but he struggled in subjects like Religious Education, where he recalls the teacher hitting a book out of his hand in anger.

Despite recalling positive educational experiences involving certain teachers and subjects, Mike did have strong mistrust of those in power in his grammar school, and he feels that unfair exclusions and isolations were disproportionately given to ethnic minorities and working-class groups within the school, including himself. “The brats”, a term he used to describe the more privileged learners in the grammar school, would not get into trouble for the same behaviors. He says:

I mean one year they excluded... I was like Year 9, we were all kicking off, ‘cause we were getting into trouble for stuff, that *they* wouldn’t get into trouble

for. Teachers would hear racial slurs and wouldn't do anything about it. I remember one year 29 of us got excluded from school for 5 days... all from different years, and only two of them were White. [emphasis added]

Mike talks about the racism that his younger sisters experienced in school too, and also describes other incidents where teachers were suspended for racist comments. He argues that discriminatory practices at his grammar school were generally “underneath” and not visible, and he found them difficult to describe. Gillborn (2016) argues that the official narrative on race has changed in schooling and that discriminatory practices are more subtle in institutions compared to previous years. Mike argues that the racist behaviours were occasionally blatant but mostly existed in the indirect behaviours of teachers, for example not responding to racial slurs, oversurveillance and disproportionate punishment of pupils from raced localities. Mike's narrative appears to resemble many of the empirical studies discussed in Chapter Two in relation to the STPP; oversurveillance, targeting by teachers, exclusionary practices and privileging White and middle/upper-class learners over ethnic minorities and working-class pupils.

Another pupil from a minority ethnic background, Ashley, who identifies as British Asian, describes his ethnic status as being inculcated negatively in his learning journey, and being overshadowed by other learners. He reflects: “Sometimes you felt you didn't fit in, err, because in the classroom out of 25 kids, you and two other people are the only Brown and Black person in the room.” I asked Ashley if he felt he was treated differently because of his ethnic background, he responds:

I think I did, not just because of, well, partially my background, I wasn't always academically ahead of other people I was just left at the back [*long pause*]... yeah. I was just overlooked because academically I wasn't great, and other people were ahead of me, so for that reason, I was just overlooked. I didn't get the required attention... but I think that has definitely changed now... well I hope it has.

Ashley talked about schooling but it was mostly in his capacity as a manager in an ex-offender organisation responsible for young people at risk of committing crime. The personal insights he offered centred around his self-perception as an underachiever and being overlooked by more able pupils. Ashley did not mention disruptive behaviours and instead suggests a passivity in his learner identity, being “overlooked” rather than attempting to stand out. Archer (2008) discusses how

institutional processes categorise types of learner identities based on ethnic minority identification. They argue that ethnic minority learner identities are incommensurate with dominant notions of educational success in modern day neoliberal schooling, and both working-class and Muslim pupils – Ashley identifies as both – are positioned as having potential, “but not attracting much resources or attention in practice” (Archer, 2008, p. 92). Ashley’s experience resembles that described by Archer; he occupied a position of Other in schooling. This seems to resemble Ashley’s experience and suggests that he occupied a position of Other in schooling, albeit his experiences were less overt than Mike’s.

Of the six participants from ethnic minority backgrounds, Mike and Ashley were the only participants who talked about classroom-based practices that related to their raced identities. The remaining participants from ethnic minorities experienced familial and social struggles and these difficulties are described in the following sections. As stated earlier, Mike is from a small town in the West of England and attended a predominately White school in a middle-class area. The other participants come from large cosmopolitan cities and described multiethnic schools which appeared to have a better understanding of inclusion and social cohesion, with the possible exception of Ashley’s school. The environment made them feel that they belonged as their cultures were celebrated in the school space, and they remembered learning about diverse cultures within their community. The disciplinary behaviours of certain teachers in Mike’s narrative and his reactions resemble the shaping of a resistant masculine identity that is identified in STPP literature. However, neither Mike nor Ashley’s narratives follow a typical STPP trajectory- identified in Chapter Two. Mike and Ashley do not report LDDs, and were not permanently excluded from school. Mike claims that his isolation experiences happened no more than five times in his entire school career. Their capability to participate in education would not have been dramatically affected due to disciplinary measures, although it seems Ashley did need extra support that he was not given and experienced educational disengagement as a consequence. Mike and Ashley also did fairly well at GCSE, achieving mostly Bs, Cs and Ds, yet both entered into criminality in their mid-teens. Mike’s narrative is awash with the racism he experienced and Ashley infers potential difficulties with school practices, but the other four ethnic minority participants do not report racism in schooling and their struggles at school are attributable to other areas, and will be discussed shortly. As

discussed in the limitations of this study (chapter ten), the absence of reporting of racism does not mean the participants did not experience discrimination, it means they chose not to disclose it in the space of the interview.

“Educational Nepotism”: Social Class and Relations with Teachers

The remainder of this chapter will focus on participants who are from diverse backgrounds. They describe their relationships with teachers, adult expectations and (non)-compliance with school practices in different ways. Matty is a White working-class man in his late 20s, from one of the poorest towns in England. He describes the very low expectation that his teachers had not just of him, but also the vast majority of young people in his school. He vividly describes his disillusionment with school and lack of faith in the teachers that were entrusted to educate him. Matty said that school “meant nothing” to him. He recalled:

You know, you start to make a name for yourself and teachers picking on you, sending you out, excluding you, isolation, and then, like you, a lot of us, got put in, like, little special classes. Like when ya couldn't handle us anymore. Uh, like, basically, they would take us out of these classes... Um, yes. Like my attitude was... I just stopped going. I just stopped. I stopped going in... No, I wouldn't go.

Matty's resistance to authority began in schooling with teachers attempting to control his disruptive behaviours and he began truanting regularly. Robert, who is also from a White working-class background, also describes his educational disengagement and truancy and how he would spend his days wandering around his city, rather than in classrooms where he was considered the “naughty boy”. The participants describe how teachers' attitudes contributed to feelings of isolation and not belonging in the school community, and instead, Matty and Doug, who is also from a White working-class background, found acceptance in peer groups on the street. Wignall (2019) argues that belonging is particularly imperative in the construction of masculine identities amongst boys living on the margins, and a sense of attachment “rooted in relationships of responsibility” (p. 141) is a positive way that an institution can support ‘at-risk’ youth to flourish. Participants did offer glimpses of attachment to members of staff who made them feel part of the community. Similarly to Mike, Matty recalled good relations with a male teacher in the first few years of schooling, but after an altercation, he soon lost faith in him too. Martin also talked fondly about a teaching assistant who was like his “second mum” and supported him

when the teachers rejected him, but these positive relationships did not make up for the general feeling of educational disillusionment, the rejection and the lack of faith they felt in light of exclusionary practices and their response was ongoing truancy and disruptiveness.

Some participants from middle-class backgrounds also experienced educational disengagement but their experiences with teachers were markedly different from those described to the participants so far. Tom, for example, is from a family of teachers and grew up in a comfortable middle-class home in the countryside. His parents had high expectations of him but their time was taken up with his younger sister, who had LDDs and fighting for her right for equal access in mainstream schooling. Tom described being the youngest in the year and attending a small, village school in an idyllic country setting. He remembers his older brother being pulled out from class to take him to the toilet and being “babied” by a female teacher who would look after him at breaktimes. Tom described himself as being uninterested in academia and labels himself as the “black sheep” of his peer group, as he achieved one C at GCSE and did not go on to do A levels whereas they all went onto HE. Instead, he went into theatre as a technician and learnt the trade at a young age. He recalled his feelings about school: “I didn’t hate it but I didn’t like it. So, I just wasn’t interested in any sort of academia. I discovered theatre and I wanted to be a theatre technician from a very young age.”

Tom did not report any trauma or rebelling against school authorities, but instead described a disinterestedness that none of this family or friends shared and which led him to position himself as the odd one out. Tom was careful not to describe himself through a discourse of (dis)ability, or lack of understanding in lessons. He simply states he was uninterested. It was not until his time in a prison classroom that he felt confidence in himself as a learner for the first time. He positioned himself against his peers from less-privileged backgrounds and is able, perhaps for the first time, to enjoy a position of being at the top of the class, in contrast to his schooling days (see Chapter Seven).

Tom’s truanting experiences also differ from the cohort described above; participants from working-class backgrounds reported being left to the streets to fill their days, sometimes under the influence of destructive peer-led behaviours which encouraged low-level criminality. Tom on the other hand spent his days in the theatre, learning skills and developing a passion that would eventually be his future

career. Tom is far from the ideal learner, as he did not complete homework, he was uninterested in learning and experienced underachievement. He did not recall excessive punishment or targeting from teachers however, apart from the odd suspension and phone call to his mother about “forgetting” to do his homework. His truancy was tolerated by his teachers, but in a different way to the participants above. He was learning a craft in a setting where he felt inspired and under the tutorship of adults in the theatre who (unofficially) took him under their wing; he was not pathologised by teachers or sent out of class, but this is most likely because he did not display disruptive behaviours. Another participant, Joe, was also from a family of teachers and offers another reason which may explain Tom’s relatively easy relations with the teachers, despite being an “unacceptable learner.” Joe recalls:

It was quite good, positive experience with the teachers. So, you know, I can remember... You may feel intimidated, you know, first day of a new year and you know, come across a strict geography teacher. And he says, ‘G____, are you M____ G____’s son?’ And I said, ‘Oh, yes, I am’. So, I could kind of detect an educational nepotism, really... So, some people can say ‘you’re a swot’ or, you know, but yeah. So, no, it was a good experience, really.

It was beneficial to Joe to have a well-known teacher as his father and he recalls being favoured by the teachers – the ‘educational nepotism’ worked to his advantage. The gendered slur of being a male pupil and a hardworking ‘swot’, demonstrated in studies as a dangerous subject position in schooling (Francis, 2009), does not appear to have been a risk to Joe’s hegemonic status and this insinuation carries little weight. There is a possibility that Tom’s only negative teacher experience, being “babied”, was because he was from a middle-class family of teachers that was respected in the culture of the school. As the ‘family struggles’ section highlights later on in this chapter, the working-class participants did not enjoy the same experiences and many of their families were known to the school in a negative way.

In sum, axes of (dis)advantage have been discussed to understand the genesis of educational disengagement and how school responses to academic struggle result in the shaping of resistant, anti-authority masculinities and, for some, finding belonging away from the school community, on the street where emerging masculinities are shaped by violence, drug-taking and low-level criminality. These struggles intersect with race and contribute to disadvantage for some pupils, and their feelings towards teachers ranged from mistrust and anti-authority sentiment to

having close relationships with those who they felt showed genuine concern and care. Participants from middle-class backgrounds did not share the negative experiences that others highlighted and instead described practices of “educational nepotism” and although displaying “unacceptable” learner practices, their privileged class and family status was a further protective factor from pathologising practices.

‘Cock-of-the-School’ and the “Clown of the Class”: Social Dynamics and Fitting in to Male Hierarchies

This section builds on the schooling and masculinities literature discussed in Chapter Three and suggests that performing a masculine role in order to belong socially can be detrimental to learning and learner identities. Some of the participants did not struggle academically, or at least chose not to share intellectual struggles. Instead, when presented with the opening question regarding their memories of schooling, some participants focused on the social dynamic of their experiences and wanted to discuss the behaviours of their peers and the social role they played in the classroom dynamic. This section discusses the peer dynamic and how fitting in and being accepted/popular amongst peers appeared more important to focus on than academic skills, although some participants discussed multiple areas of difficulty and inequality. This section focuses on participants’ experiences of performing ‘laddish’ or ‘hard’ masculine identities, both the antithesis of the ‘ideal learner’ identity or the pathologised ‘boffin’ (Francis, 2009). The experiences of learners so far have discussed disruptive behaviours stemming from a protest against teachers and authority, as well as participants struggling with unmet LLD needs and reacting to isolationist and exclusionary practices. This section discusses participants who suggest disruptive behaviours stemmed from a social need to be accepted by peers and behaving in “laddish” ways secured them a higher spot in the hierarchy. Studies suggest that laddish behaviours are a way for socially marginalised boys to occupy a hegemonic space in the masculine hierarchy of school (Archer, 2006; Francis, 2006, 2009; Willis, 1978) and middle-class boys to appropriate these behaviours to gain social power in educational settings (C. Jackson & Dempster, 2009). This gendered subject position is set in opposition to the ‘ideal learner’ who is characterised by diligence, compliance and achievement. Accordingly, occupying the opposing space can negatively affect educational capabilities and outcomes.

Brett, a White man from Ireland in his early 50s, recalls that he did not struggle academically at school and he did not have problems with his teachers at the all-boys comprehensive that he attended in Ireland in the early 1980s. He was a bright student who was in the all the top sets – top 15 in fact - in the first year of secondary school. However, he began to disengage from education due to “behavioural” reasons, or “acting the fool.” He explains that he attempted and failed to make friends, and soon became the “class clown” in order to attract attention. He describes his parents sending him to a “good” school where his uncle was a teacher, and he travelled 25 miles a day but did not know anybody there. The contact with his uncle backfired as he was bullied for having a connection with a teacher; the perception of being the “teacher’s pet” is considered an effeminate subject position (Francis, 2006) and Brett was positioned in a subordinate masculine identity early on his secondary school career. Brett pushed back and attempted to make friends and impress peers by being an archetypal “lad”, but struggled to navigate an unfamiliar social milieu. He recalls the new school serving the local council estates in the area and his peers were ‘street smart’ and cool. He had grown up in a small hamlet in the countryside and spent his childhood playing in the fields with his siblings and cousins. He said he was the “leader” of his friendship group in primary school but in his new secondary school, he needed to prove himself to make new friends. He said the “cool kids” smoked and wore leather jackets. He seemed to be equally embarrassed and reflective at the memory of himself trying to fit in with the “cool crowd.”

It appeared Brett wanted to move on swiftly from memories of school as it was a time where he did not belong and was not able to negotiate popular discourses. This resulted in educational disengagement and fuelled unhealthy masculine behaviours which led to expulsion and made him vulnerable to crime; ultimately, his way of fitting in dramatically affected his future. He was permanently excluded from school three months before his final exams, but was allowed to take his exams. He did well, despite being the “class clown”, and achieved mostly Bs and Cs; however, his behaviours did not change, and he was then excluded from a further two colleges. He then fell into low-level crime, mostly “stealing from solicitors offices”, and eventually became addicted to drugs, struggled with mental health and spent time in prison. He reflects that school was a “missed opportunity” and perhaps, he remarks, it would have been better if he had stayed more local and gone to a school

closer to his home. Would Brett's future have taken a different path? No one can know this, but Brett's narrative demonstrates that performing a social role such as the "class clown" in order to be included in a masculine hierarchy, can lead to "exclusion from cultures sanctioned by the school" (Youdell, 2006, p. 31), and an attempt to be noticed can render an individual intelligible as a 'lad' or a 'joker', but simultaneously excluded as an 'impossible learner', unable to flourish in acceptable ways which would lead to more fruitful options post-school.

Robert and Connor are White working-class men, both in their 50s, who both also used the term "class clown" to describe themselves in their classrooms. They were also eventually permanently excluded. Connor described himself as being the "class idiot"; he simply went "along with the crazy kids in the class", "having a crack" and describing his class as generally being "a bunch of delinquents" who "gave two teachers nervous breakdowns." He does not recall anyone in his class wanting to learn because they were all "out of their heads." He says their class was named after a famous Irish county, and that his class was famous for generations for being so disruptive and unruly. Although Connor goes on to talk about LDDs in general terms, referring to his time in prison, he never talks about struggling academically in the interview and is simply filled with retrospective sympathy for the teachers who tried to control his and his peers' unruly behaviours. Connor's narrative is informed by a deficit discourse and he feels the only people to blame for their lack of educational success were themselves. He does not describe undue punishment from teachers and does not show signs of any protest against them or perception of unjust behaviours. This does not mean that these behaviours did not happen in Connor's school, rather his overriding memories were that his peers were impossible to control, they were 'impossible learners' and 'unteachable', incommensurate with school discourses of compliance, diligence and achievement. When I asked Connor why he thought they all behaved like this, he cited troubled home lives and growing up on a notorious estate in a large city in Ireland. Connor describes his mum dying when he was seven years old and being "pushed from pillar to post" until he went to live with his uncle who was an alcoholic. Connor did not dwell on family history or his academic capabilities, however, he was comfortable talking about the social dynamic and the "class of delinquents" that he felt characterised his school days.

Others discussed the importance of being perceived as 'hard' by their peers, rather than being the 'class clown', as this offered protection but also allowed one to

surround oneself with like-minded peers. Doug recalls forming a friendship group in the first year of secondary school, and that they all shared a common characteristic – being ‘hard’ – he laughs: “it wasn’t based around academic interest.” He describes his closest friend as the “cock-of-the-school” – a gendered term to denote status and influence, and relating to discourses of toughness. He describes this friendship as a strategy that gave him some protection. When I asked Doug how the teachers perceived his friendship group he answered, “there weren’t a lot of expectations from us.” Matty’s friendship group also revolved around levels of ‘hardness’ and, in Chapter Eight, I describe how violence features in Matty’s need to impress his peer group on the street and prove he is “game for anything.” His street peer group were all taking drugs and had given up on school long ago; there was pressure for Matty to do the same and spend time on the estate, simply having fun, and this usually involved low-level criminality. Matty’s masculine identity is shaped by the street, and by impressing his peers socially he found a place where he belonged although there was still struggle as he was the youngest. In school, as already discussed, he was excluded and experienced feelings of alienation.

Jo Jo, a Black British 25-year-old and also recalls how the social dynamic of schooling affected him, and how getting involved with the “wrong crowd” led him down a more “aggressive” path, that did not resemble his upbringing. He recalls his time in Year 9:

Then what happened was I started to make friends. I started to be around different people, different types of people with different backgrounds... People can maybe come from maybe more rough environments, or maybe they come from households where there's lot of things going on... once I got to secondary school and I was around different types of people, these behaviours started to come out.

Up until the first year of secondary school, Jo Jo had been an acceptable and even ‘ideal learner’. He was in the top set for maths, and he enjoyed learning. Although his dad was a property entrepreneur and did not value education the way his mum did, he was brought up to respect his teachers, not to swear and to do his homework. At some point in Year 9, his behaviours took a more “aggressive” and “boisterous” turn. He remarks that this behaviour as indicative of the all-boys school he attended, and that he felt boys were just naturally inclined to fight and be aggressive. Within his friendship group, he did not feel the need to perform behaviours to fit in. In fact, he described himself as the “peacemaker” and often

defended people who were being picked on. Despite this, he became involved in “streets and gangs” outside of school, and his entire peer group were arrested just before sitting his GCSEs. He was also smoking a lot of cannabis at the time due to the stress of an impending court case and he was not revising or paying attention in lessons; he was just turning up when he wanted to. At GCSE, he achieved one C in maths and the rest were Ds and below. Jo Jo was sentenced to a year and a half in a secure training centre at the age of 16, two months after receiving his GCSE results. It is clear that getting in with the “wrong crowd” dramatically affected Jo Jo’s start in life, his capability to participate in education and his previously promising academic start capitulated under the weight of the influence of gangs, street violence and involvement with the police. The police intervened in Jo Jo’s educational trajectory due to his crime, and his experience of learning in a young offender’s institute is discussed in Chapter Seven.

The final participant in this group is Cassie. Cassie’s experience of school is markedly different from those of the other participants in this group. Rather than attempting to perform behaviours that would position him high up in the masculine hierarchy, such as being ‘hard’ or a ‘lad’, Cassie admits that he was castigated and bullied by his peers, and found himself in a subordinate masculine role from very early on in his schooling. He has been othered throughout his life. He is from a working-class background and at 57, he recalls his childhood from the late 1970s. Cassie’s overriding memory of school is how much he hated it. His school days were dominated by bullying and violence from peers, and sometimes teachers, and he repeats five times during the opening exchange in our interview: “I hated it”; he hated school. Cassie was bullied for his physical appearance – “sticky out ears”, being skinny “like a matchstick” and having a “squint”. He describes routinely experiencing corporal punishment, not for being disruptive but for not complying with school practices such as homework. He recalls:

I weren't a classroom idiot. It were, mainly I used to get it for the lack of homework and engaging in that way. Yeah, I would think, 'school's at school. I'm not doing it at home.' I've never got me 'ead into doing homework and then they say, 'Where's your own homework [name]?' And you'd say you hadn't done it and they'd say, 'Two strokes of the stick. Off you go upstairs, you know where to go.'

Cassie directly names and refutes the positioning of “the classroom idiot” – the archetypal ‘lad’ – and describes how his behaviour was not characteristically

disruptive. He did not seek to attain high status and popular masculine positionings, and instead resisted classroom practices that were uninteresting to him. Cassie lists the subjects he enjoyed, especially English, and remembers it coming “naturally to him.” His ongoing interest in English Literature refutes stereotypes of working-class boys’/men’s lack of interest in reading (Scholes, 2019) and suggests that Cassie did mostly comply during lesson time. Cassie’s school experiences did not follow the ‘at-risk’ pathways of impossible learners, where disruptive boys can be isolated by school authorities and are at risk of school exclusion. Instead, his experiences reflect a subjectivity shaped by being Othered and ascribed a subordinate masculinity both by peers and, on occasion, teachers. Cassie did not have to be formally excluded from the school premises to be alienated – his social isolation was painfully clear in his narrative.

“My Dad Said ‘You’ll be Dead or in Prison by 20’”: Family Dynamics, Expectations and Aspirations

The participants described a diverse range of family dynamics and experiences. Some chose not to talk about their families; for others, memories of family trauma overwhelmed the interview space. Some learners struggled with extremely difficult situations in their childhoods including parents’ alcoholic behaviours, parental separation, witnessing violence, and experiencing abuse and neglect. These experiences affected their capability to participate in education and for some, their masculine subjectivity was shaped by violence early on in their adolescence and contributed to violent offending in adulthood (discussed in Chapter Seven). Some participants from working-class backgrounds reported that despite the adversities their parents did want them to flourish and did care about their behaviours at school, others describe that although the will might have been there, their parents were too busy with surviving and getting through the day. Some participants from immigrant families, on the other hand, described loving homes and mothers, in particular, with strong educational values. Ultimately, however, some of these participants felt the pressure to do well in their education and were steered in certain academic directions against their wishes, which resulted in disengagement. For the participants from middle-class British families, who were from a range of ethnic backgrounds, tensions existed with the type of school attended and how they navigated private schools and the associated pressure to succeed.

Robert is the only participant who experienced the state care system. Forty percent of prison leavers report having experienced the care system (Halliday, 2021), so my sample is not representative in this respect. Robert describes his schooling in the 1980s and “getting into trouble” after starting secondary school. He was appointed a social worker that recommended he was put into state care and he describes a positive experience with “very supportive” staff and teachers. He said he learnt “how to behave” in society as well as learning academic and vocational skills. At 16 he enrolled in a Youth Training Scheme (YTS) scheme and successfully trained to be a plumber. He went straight into work with a local plumbing company and worked for 20 years without committing any offences. Reflecting upon his education and time in care, he felt that their input stopped him from going “straight to prison.” Robert was on parole at the time of the interview, for his first offence. He hated prison and was working with the charity that arranged the interviews to skill up and seek employment on a building site. Robert did not grow up with his family, but the proxy parent of state care supported him to participate in education and gain qualifications and he went on to have a crime-free life (until his first crime committed the previous year to the interview). He recalls the teachers being aspirational about his future. Robert’s account differs from the narratives provided in Maguire’s (2016) prison research, where several respondents recount traumatic experiences and abuse in residential children’s home.

Stuart and Joel were brought up in violent homes. Although Joel’s family was in regular contact with social services for the many cuts and bruises he would turn up to school with, he was never removed from the family home. The shaping of Stuart’s and Joel’s gender subjectivities and the influence of violence is discussed in greater detail in Chapter Seven. Stuart and Joel struggled at school; Stuart would become upset when he did not understand the learning point, and Joel “messed about” in lessons and became a violent bully. In terms of expectations, Joel recalls his father saying to him, “You’ll be dead or in prison by 20”. Joel’s father was a disciplinarian and punished his children violently for not following instructions. Both report struggling with unmet LDDs and neither recall their parents providing any help. In both interviews, their narratives were fragmented and neither were interested in talking about education, especially Joel. Joel’s trauma was significant and he recounted many stories of abuse from both his parents and it appeared that education was not of central importance in either of their houses. However, both

discuss learning vocational trades with their fathers. Stuart's father was a painter and decorator, and Joel's father was a joiner. They both recall learning skills as young boys on weekends. In later adolescence, Joel recalls arguing with his father and not being able to work with him anymore. However, they both learnt vocational trades, partly through their fathers work and also through qualifications gained in school and college, which led to paid work in adulthood. It can be deduced that Stuart's and Joel's masculine identities were shaped by their fathers; both in terms of violent subjectivity and work-related trajectories.

Matty, Brett and Doug did not report violence in the homes, but they did talk about the struggles of life for their parents, and how their children's educations were not at the forefront of their minds, mostly because they were too busy surviving. Brett reflects: "If they are just trying to make it through the week or make it through the day... So, it's, I guess with educational expectation.... there's a limit to it because there was a limit to their own."

Doug explains that he grew up on a large and poor estate in a city in a deprived part of England. He remembered being known for his social profile as a "scruffy kid". He recalls that there were not many expectations around education in his home, not just for him, but for his siblings and many from his community. He knew that the school was aware of the challenges his family faced, but his family was not the only one just getting by. School was simply something 'you had to do', until you did not do it anymore. Matty also recalled the troubles of life and how his parents had their own issues to deal with. When I ask Matty and Doug about their parents and their circumstances growing up, it caused "moments of trouble" (Morison & Macleod, 2013) in the interview which I have discussed in the methodology chapter (Chapter Five). Matty is protective of his mum, with whom he now has a good relationship, and suggests that she did care about his education. His mum supported what the school stipulated in terms of his behaviour, but gave up when he was in secondary school, mostly due to his "relentlessness" in not doing what he was told. He then realised that this is also around the time that his mum and dad separated and his mum developed a problem with alcohol. Matty describes some very troubled times with his mum. In the absence of a mentally-well guardian to take care of him, it is clear that his education suffered and he spiralled further into addiction himself. As discussed in the last section, Matty found a sense of belonging

on the street that he did not experience in the school or, at that time, in his childhood home.

The participants from stable families had a different set of tensions and conflicts to navigate. Reese is from second-generation Indian parents and Freddie has Nigerian heritage. Both of their mothers expected a lot from their sons' education. These two participants describe an interest in and passion for the arts, but explain that they felt the pressure to do well in maths and sciences in order to fulfil their parents' wishes: to be a doctor in Reese's case, and a physiotherapist in Freddie's. Both participants became disengaged with education in their final years of schooling, for very different reasons. Freddie describes his "driven" mum (and to a lesser extent his "successful" dad) as putting a lot of pressure on him during school to achieve. He remembers his Mum being angry with him for achieving a C in his swimming class when he was achieving straight As in every other class. However, he also credits her and his older sister with teaching him to read by the age of three, and giving him good educational opportunities in his formative years. However, Freddie had enough of being told what to do and started to become disinterested in his secondary schooling and, in his words, "became lazy". He achieved straight A* at GCSE despite not working hard, but he did not seem to enjoy the success and did not attempt to position himself as intellectually superior or gifted. He eventually decided to become an accountant instead of fulfilling his mum's wishes of becoming a physiotherapist. Reese, on the other hand was the victim of gang-related violence. His family are practicing Sikhs and he was targeted and beaten by a "Muslim gang". Reese felt this moment changed him forever. He went from being an 'ideal learner' –hardworking, compliant and a high achiever – to spending his evenings plotting revenge, forming his own gang and behaving like a "gangster." He sat his GCSEs, completed his A levels and eventually went to university. He did not get the grades to study medicine like his father wanted, however, as he did not study hard enough. Reese eventually got involved in dealing drugs, and then firearms and then began importing large amounts of cocaine. He received the longest sentence of the cohort. Although his education did not help him choose a law-abiding path, it did help him navigate prison, and this is discussed in the next chapter.

Lastly, Harry and Otis are from upper and middle-class families respectively, and both went to all-boys, fee-paying schools. Otis described his parents selling their house to pay for his and his sister's education, and Harry recalled his four half-

sisters not receiving the same education as him – this caused tensions in the family. Harry argues that his public-school education where he boarded for a number of years was the “perfect preparation” for prison. His father had also been to a public school and suggested that learning to cope in an institution away from home would “do him good”. He says:

And I think the comment at the time was, you know, a little time away will do him good. You know, it'll toughen him up. My father was always a great one for being toughened up, you know? He had been through a public-school education, so, you know, he had been toughened up.

Although Harry had a privileged education, he struggled with some subjects, especially maths. An important experience from Harry's education was the shaping of his masculine identity and learning to be stoic and self-reliant. It is noteworthy that Harry's father was from the upper echelon of society yet his mantra was also a reflection of a tough masculinity. This suggests that tropes of toughness belonging to working-class identities are too simplistic. As will be discussed in the following chapters, Harry talks at length using discourses of rationality whilst in prison and struggles to understand fellow inmates who butt against authority. Harry was supported financially and materially throughout his HE experience including training to become a teacher, although he struggled to find a permanent teaching position, until eventually securing a permanent job in a local authority. His mother is his saving grace when he leaves prison as well, and he describes his survival post-prison being predicated on “the bank of Mum.” This is different to the participants from working-class origins and this made a huge difference in their educational trajectories.

In sum, family dynamics were varied. The participants' narratives shed light on how family (dis)advantage intersected with their educational trajectories and for many, shaped the masculine identities that appeared to contribute to determining their futures. The following section will sum up and draw conclusions from this opening chapter.

Conclusion

This chapter draws out features of prison leavers' schooling experiences that help to understand the genesis of educational disengagement, and why many men in prison have struggled with learning earlier in their lives. Beyond the key features of prison leavers' educational experiences described in government reports, including

exclusion, underachievement and truancy, the educational experiences discussed in this chapter demonstrate how gender, race, (dis)ability and class shape subjectivities in schooling and can contribute to learner identities that can interrupt future learning and capability development. In this chapter, I have charted the complexity of prison leavers' schooling experiences, especially the social dynamics of schooling that can shape some participants' emergent and subjective gendered experiences and influence their educational trajectories and capabilities, especially those capabilities required to participate meaningfully in education. For some participants, like Brett and Cassie, their relations with peers dominated their school years and had far-reaching effects into their futures, which will be discussed in the coming chapters. For other participants like Matty and Doug, the social dynamic was simply one extra difficulty in the multiple barriers to cope with, and another factor that led to their permanent exclusion from school and pathway to young offending.

I have argued that nearly all of the participants in this study experienced some form of educational disengagement and some struggled with multiple types of adversity and inequalities. The experiences of schooling suggest that educational disengagement took diverse forms and presented in different ways for participants which did not always result in exclusion or failing exams. Disengagement began for different reasons; some experienced unmet needs connected to LDDs, some struggled academically and did not receive positive attention from teachers, others experienced challenges relating to family problems at home. Participants' disengagement led to interactions with school practices that were detrimental to learning trajectories and capabilities and this, in turn, led to exclusion and exclusionary practices for some. Their interactions were further shaped by (dis-)ability, race and social class, peer and social dynamics. Significant family struggles including absent, troubled, violent and academically motivated parents impacted upon participants' educational journeys through school. School mechanisms, especially the attitudes and behaviours of teachers, had a detrimental effect on ethnic minority participants, and elements of the STPP research is supported in the findings.

However, participants' educational journeys are deeply complex and do not always follow a linear trajectory of educational failure and underachievement, poor behaviours and exclusion. Further, the analysis of interview data suggests that participants who have experienced multiple levels of disadvantage in schooling,

including exclusion and practices of isolation, are still able to experience moderate educational success. Conversely, those who have more secure starts with fewer adversities and disadvantages, performing so-called 'acceptable learner' identities, do not necessarily flourish in education and can still experience disengagement. This chapters highlights the importance of understanding educational journeys through an intersectional and contextual paradigm, noting struggles which are not only academic in nature or connected with school practices but which still affect educational capabilities. Examining social and peer dynamics as well as troubled homelives, capabilities in and through education have been discussed in terms of what was important for participants to highlight in their narratives, and the nature of the adversity (or conversely the advantage) they experienced. I argue in the closing chapter of this study that these findings contribute to an understanding of the complexity of the STPP, and offers further insight into the complexity of prison leavers' complex educational backgrounds, and how the shaping of gender subjectivity is inextricably connected to their future lives.

Chapter Seven: Navigating “The Jungle”: Negotiating Gender Subjectivity and Educational Capabilities in Prison

Introduction

AM: The whole ‘survival of the fittest’... is that like the bottom line?

Reese: Well, it's the jungle isn't it... what you gonna do to put food on your table? How are you gonna get your next fix for the day? So every wing has its bullies on there, they have your clever educated guys on there, you got your gym freaks on there, you got your one or two really disturbed guys on there, and then you just got your normal guys that are on there and that is pretty much the classroom on every wing up and down the country... it's just really, really bad when you get a few more of one particular type than the other, and becomes really good when you when you've lost a certain type more than the other but that general dynamic exists on every wing up and down the country and that and that's how it is ... as we speak right now ... how do you navigate that right?

This chapter endeavours to answer Reese's question and explores how participants navigated their journeys through prison, specifically examining how relational but diverse masculinities link to educational engagement and capabilities in the carceral space. How does “the classroom” that Reese described influence educational journeys, especially in light of the varied starting positions and intersectional locations discussed in the last chapter? Many of the participants used illuminating metaphors to describe the social dynamics they experienced in prison: “the jungle”, “wartime”, a “game of chess”. Participants emphasised the power systems at play, the strategies used to navigate them and the tools they utilised to survive the wings. For some of them, this was leaning on their educational skills, capabilities and evolving identities, but for others, moving away from education and asserting a tough persona. Some participants thrived in prison, and some struggled to navigate the violence on the wings. This chapter examines the tensions, challenges, rewards and roles entangled in learner's educational journeys through prison and simultaneously seeks to scrutinise the processes, pedagogies and privilege that enabled flourishing in education but also created barriers.

I begin by offering an account of how some participants negotiated relational masculinities in prison by building on their educational backgrounds and previous careers, and engaging with a discourse of reason and rationality. The following section focuses on participants who struggled academically at school and who

continue to experience barriers to education in the prison. I focus on how prison education processes take account of background, LDDs, mental health and neurodiversity and examine how a lack of meaningful support and intervention can further exclude the most vulnerable, as well as engender a tough masculinity. Conversely, those who experience barriers but do receive meaningful support are able to develop educational capabilities and begin to shape a gender subjectivity that moves away from violence and toughness. Following this, I then explain how participants who are vulnerable due to mental health problems or some who embody a vulnerable masculinity, find ways to navigate their way through prison by engaging with art and prison education in diverse ways. Their stories demonstrate that prison education processes can have a meaningful impact on the trajectory of a vulnerable person in prison, but poor processes and organisation can exclude them further.

“I’m a Reasonable Sort of Man”: Constructing Masculinity, Constructing Rationality

In some ways, the challenges described in this chapter are an extension of the schooling experiences discussed. Hierarchies, social dynamics, exclusion, violence and “fitting in” are key themes, although the identities are performed differently, and perhaps in an all-male, violent jail environment, the stakes are much higher than in school. This chapter will begin by examining the masculine presentation of men from both working-class, immigrant backgrounds and White middle-class backgrounds, who describe a mixture of educational experiences including performing ideal and acceptable learner identities. Participants invested in reason and rationality discourses when describing their values, and this section discusses how these identities influenced educational roles and capabilities. This type of masculine construction is underpinned by perceived intelligence levels, former identities defined by careers before prison, educational background (especially an experience of HE), informal and formal educative roles, types of crimes perpetrated, strategies for navigating one’s sentence effectively and perspectives on how to engage with the authorities.

Connell (2005) argues that, as well as physical aggression, hegemonic masculinity is maintained by “its claim to embody the power of reason” (p. 164) and posits itself in opposition to the emotional domain which is ‘feminine’. In their empirical work, Connell argues that “men of reason” often belong to the “new middle-

class” (p. 165) of men who have gained social standing through technical and professional trades but lack social authority granted by status, inherited wealth or corporate power. Seidler (2013) argues that a guiding principle of the enlightenment was reason and “through reason alone we can guide and shape our lives” (p. 3). They go on to argue that the relationship between masculinity and reason is a close one and it is a question between culture and nature, reason and emotion that needs to be deconstructed.

Four of the participants – Ashley, Otis, Harry and Reese – who had enjoyed careers before prison in professional trades, used the language of rationality throughout their narratives, and at times placed themselves in opposition to the practices of prisoners who they felt seemed to lack rationality or “reasonableness”. As discussed in the previous chapter, Ashley and Reese are from working-class, second-generation immigrant families; Otis is from a middle-class family, and Harry from an upper-class family. Harry and Otis both attended all-male, fee-paying schools. Ashley, who is 42 and a service manager in a national ex-offender charity, makes a clear distinction between two competing types of masculinity in prison. Ashley was imprisoned for fraud and served two years of a four-year custodial sentence. The nature of his crime appeared to be the basis of how he understood his position within the social hierarchy of prison and how, throughout his narrative, he positions himself in opposition to the “physical ones” of the prison. He remarks,

Anyone that comes into prison with a crime of fraud or something, criminal activity where there was a thought process involved, you’re automatically the intelligent one. Anyone that comes in that, obviously, with violence, you’re the alpha. You’re the dominant one. You’re the physical one. You are the kind of head of the pack.

He goes on to explain that one of his first jobs in prison was working in a bike repair shop where there “wasn’t really an alpha male.” He describes the other workers as being similar to him, having committed similar crimes and there was no place for a bully or someone who was “trying to take over.” He suggests this was because “the alpha male” would not have had the attention span to concentrate on the work involved and would probably be better suited to the gym. Ashley emphasised the physicality of the “alpha males” and through the vignette of the bike shop, establishes himself as having membership of the other group: “the intelligent ones.”

Ashley acknowledges that the “physical ones” are the “dominant ones” in prison, embodying hegemonic masculine power, or “running the show” (Messerschmitt, 2012, p. 72). He describes the educated ones as “doing their thing in the corner” suggesting they keep a low profile in hypermasculine spaces such as the wings. However, he goes on to describe how the alpha male still needs the educated ones to progress through prison. Using the analogy of a chess board, he describes how a man navigates his sentence and suggests the alpha males will surround themselves with a variety of people the further along the prison journey they progress. The Category B prisons, the holding prisons, are “the jungle”; it is about knowing what you are doing and “survival of the fittest”, where a person needs to rely on their “cliques” as well as their wits to survive. By contrast, as individuals progress to category C and D prisons, they need a variety of people to move forward, including “the educated ones.” He explains that people “who have intellect are people who can help out” and the alpha male “may not have those tools in his armoury.” Educated people become useful to the “dominant ones” and it appears that educational capabilities can become a commodity on the wings and mutually beneficial relationships can ensue. Ashley was one of the many participants who suggested that progressing through a prison sentence was about planning, strategy and a careful negotiation of relations with others, and as discussed in the following sections, educational skills, such as being able to write a professional letter, can function as currency on the wings.

Reese is another participant who felt strategy and planning was integral to progression in prison. He emphasises setting oneself deadlines to progress and he positions himself in opposition to those who “do not have a plan” and can be entangled in the clandestine world of drugs and gang warfare in prison. He committed his time fully to education and he sees this as the opposite of those who live life “on top” (ready for danger/fights, etc.). He remarks:

I think what it is, with prison, if you're involved in the drug culture, so what I mean by that, if you're taking Spice and you haven't got a lot of money and you're involved in this stupid postcode stuff that people are involved in, then every day is on top, you know what I mean? You don't know who's coming in, you don't know who's going out. With myself... I set myself deadlines on when I should get to a B Cat, when I should get to a C Cat, when I should get to a D Cat. So, in a A Cat and a B Cat, the door was closed. So, I put everything into study.

Reese was previously an ‘ideal learner’ who became embroiled in the world of drugs, guns and displaying a tough masculinity. He felt that he had let himself, his parents and his teachers down by failing in his studies. Through his prison narrative, it appeared that Reese had repaired his learner identity during his time in prison and, by engaging in planning behaviours, he impressed the prison authorities and was able to reduce his sentence. Both Reese’s and Ashley’s narratives were among the most informative of those provided by any of the participants in terms of the intricate workings of prison and how an individual should navigate it to survive and thrive during their sentence. Their understanding of the processes of prison and their strategising resulted in both of them serving only half of their custodial sentences and being released early. Engaging with prison education and becoming a peer mentor was an important part of their strategy in moving forwards. The next section discusses how those with educational capabilities gained in previous formal educational settings and in professional capacities before prison used their knowledge and skills in both formal and informal ways; for their own progression, for philanthropic good and as part of a safety strategy when navigating relations on the wings.

‘Box Ticking’ and Peer Mentors: The Diverse Purposes of Formal and Informal Educational Roles

Many participants talked about the formal role of being a peer mentor.² On analysis of their descriptions of these roles, the positioning also offered participants personal advantage and a way of navigating prison. Underpinning many prison narratives, there was an element of rationality and strategy involved as the job of peer mentoring helped them move forward in their sentences. The majority of participants found mentoring enjoyable and a worthwhile use of their time, and for one participant, a means to make amends for his crime.

Reese, who served 9 years of an 18-year sentence for “drugs and guns”, strategised every section of his prison sentence and threw himself into both studying and getting jobs with positions of responsibility in order to lower his security status. Reese found he did not really enjoy the peer mentoring, as he found many did not

² Peer mentors support peers within the classroom and on the wings to develop skills and knowledge; they often assist teachers with planning and tutoring.

want to learn, yet the role did help him move forward in progressing to a lower security prison. Similarly to Reese, Harry suggested that part of his motivation for his role as a peer mentor was a “box ticking” exercise that allowed him to present positively to his Offender Behaviour Manager:

I suppose part of me was, you know, once again it's ticking a box, isn't it? You know, showing that I was engaging with the regime, and I was giving something back. It was showing the Offender Manager and then probation. You know, I'm a reasonable sort of person and, you know, um, you know, I'll help where I can.

Harry describes himself as “reasonable” and part of being a reasonable man is sharing skills and educational capital with others. Harry enjoyed his time working as a peer mentor and found that it was simply a pleasant end to his teaching career. Harry had worked in administration for a public service for over 20 years, but prior to this, he had trained as a teacher. He never attained a permanent position and mostly worked as a supply teacher. As Harry had been convicted of a sexual offence, he would not be allowed to work in schools again, so the opportunity to teach in prison was appreciated.

Harry, like other participants who had experienced positive and privileged beginnings in education, found prison education offered many opportunities to develop capabilities and he did not struggle with participation. Feeling at home in a classroom on the VPU, Harry was able to support his fellow learners by teaching maths and English and helping to build their confidence. Harry feels sympathy for those who had experienced educational disadvantage and describes how he would assure them that they were the unfortunate recipients of poor schooling, and that it was not their lack of ability. At times however, Harry also suggests that many of them would “not dream of picking up a book.” If they did, he argues, they may pick up a tabloid newspaper occasionally, but it “certainly wouldn't be Shakespeare or Dickens”. These comments feed into a stereotype of those who are educated/cultured and those who are not in prison. In other parts of Harry's account, it is clear he found learners' behaviours unintelligible at times, especially when they rallied against authority:

Well, I suppose it was people who were just ... they were breaking the rules, weren't they? You know, they were working against the regime, and they were just making life harder for themselves. Because you're [pause] in a system there. There's nothing really you can do about it. So, you try and make the best of it.

Harry describes “the system” as “immovable” and is again subscribing to a rational mindset in the face of challenges or injustice. Behaviours connected to protest masculinity (Connell, 2005), or “breaking the rules” as he describes it, feels like a waste of time. He goes on to describe how he and his friends also “rehabilitated ourselves, as we have a certain amount of intelligence.” Being rational and strategic is again linked with rehabilitation and ultimately intelligence levels or at least the ability to think rationally. Harry is establishing himself in this social group of rational men, strategic thinkers and the “intelligent ones” who do not challenge a resolute system.

Otis, like Harry, attended an all-boys, fee-paying school and went on to become a teacher in his life before prison. Otis described himself as the former Head of Heads of departments: “anyone who had anything to do with numbers reported to me.” Another man of reason then, Otis held power and authority in his former identity as an education leader in an elite school. At the beginning of his narrative, however, Otis describes how his authority, knowledge and skills were challenged by the management of the prison education department. He describes his and his friend’s idea (also a former teacher in a fee-paying school) of setting up a peer-led initiative to support teachers with outreach, engagement and admin on the wings, and how it was refused by education management. He was extremely angry about this and felt that the prison teaching staff’s experience and qualifications were inferior to those of Otis and his friend. He recounted what he said to management at the time:

Um, we have decades of experience of education, educational leadership, transformation between us [*pause*] our sum total experience between the two of us is more than the experience of your entire staff at this prison!

Otis’s account of his earlier self was consistent with this aspect of hegemonic masculinity; a “numbers man” he was an educational leader in a prestigious school. He was used to telling people what to do, and “running the show” (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005, p. 830) and after (unsuccessfully) attempting to position himself as a useful ‘ideas man’, especially on how to reach those who had disengaged from education, he continued to feel resentful that this role was never fully appreciated or realised. It was hard to fully understand Otis’s role in the education department during his time in prison; in one description he is a cleaner, in others he is an unofficial peer mentor for one of the maths teachers. Otis talked about the pitfalls of prison education eloquently but as if he is addressing a large

group of people rather than in conversation with me, a former prison teacher. It appeared that his self-image as authoritative had been knocked by the education manager and as well as grappling with being a convicted sex offender. It appeared that Otis's identity as a powerful man 'calling the shots' is altered and shaken, especially in educational contexts.

Otis talked openly and with deep regret about his crime and describes how he spent time during his sentence ruminating on how he had lost his former identity as a teacher. Similarly to Harry, he positioned himself against his working-class peers and suggested that his former identity as a teacher and committing an offence, has more gravitas than someone who held a blue-collar job and committed a crime:

Because in the polite sense, if you're a Brickey and you commit an offence, you're sort of a Brickey who has committed an offence, but being part of a caring profession ... you have lost that. It's really part of your identity that you lose, you know, like you were a teacher. But you're not a teacher anymore. Umm and that was really hard to deal with, then work out. What does that mean? But also, why did I do that?

As the interview continued, it became clear Otis was not interested in the role of being a peer mentor; he was used to being in a management position, occupying a position of power. The prison education department was a source of disappointment to him, and it appears that this relates in part to his loss of status.

However, the skills and confidence he had gained from his former position also worked in his favour at times and helped him to navigate the bureaucracy of prison effectively. Unlike those who had reasons to mistrust authority, and struggled to navigate the systems of penal power effectively (as will be discussed in later chapters), Otis was able to confidently hold prison authorities to account. He describes a situation in which he disliked a pad mate and wanted to be moved immediately. When the officers did not acquiesce, he was able to hold those who were not doing what he wanted responsible for their inaction. He threatened the officers with a paper trail which would contain clear evidence that they were not doing their jobs properly and that they were at fault due to a lack of care and diligence. Otis comments:

Because I'm good at paperwork and I can argue, you, you sort of end up getting your way, ahem, not getting your way, but you end up having to resolve this, I got to resolve the situation in a nonviolent fashion because I was able to argue coherently.

Understanding the bureaucratic processes of prison, Otis is able to speak the language of authority, rationality and bureaucracy and hold them to account effectively. He is confident in his management skills and, importantly to him, he is able to resolve the issue non-violently. This is subtle nod to the many men in prison who use violence, and protest masculinity practices, including jumping on the netting and barricading themselves in their rooms, when they are not able to successfully resolve an issue. Otis's strategy, on the other hand, brought him resolution and he managed to refashion himself into a position of power.

“Solicitor on the Wing”: Keeping Relations on an “Even Keel”

One participant described the informal educational role of being a “solicitor on the wing” and using his educational capabilities and skills to support others. Reese says:

So, if you've been to university and you go to prison and you're on remand, you'll find that a lot of the guys, they will kind of see you as a ‘solicitor on the wing’, and I was certainly... there was a lot of paperwork, do you know what I mean? I was always getting people coming and sitting with me and asking me my opinion on certain things.

Reese describes how participants who were graduates or “seemed educated” also engaged with an informal role of helping peers on the wings. This role was a position that could be seen in some instances as a mutually beneficial exchange with others who had different capabilities or reputations. Learners with limited reading and writing capabilities would ask for help with writing letters, filling out application forms, and other bureaucratic tasks, from those who appeared educated. Reese appeared to enjoy this role more than his formal peer mentoring position. He was interested in people's cases and found it a useful opportunity to learn about others' crimes, the police and how the court systems work. Reese also describes how others were shocked he was in prison for “guns and drugs”, as he wore glasses and spoke in an “educated way.”

Otis describes supporting fellow inmates with their studies and form-filling, describing how this proved to be useful to him too. He describes a number of his friends, two of whom were former SAS officers, and one of whom had very large biceps and a reputation for “gauging people's eyes out” (before prison). He suggests that “when you've got a frame like that, people aren't going to argue with you” and admitted that “it's helpful to get on with those sorts of people.” Otis talks about how

he helped his friend with his studies including proofreading his essays and also giving advice on romantic relationships. On an informal basis, helping out on the wing enhanced safety strategies in hypermasculine contexts and keeping relationships, as Otis suggests, on an “even keel.” Again, the line between “the physical ones” and the “educated ones” are drawn, but in these informal educative spaces, relationships can be found to be mutually beneficial. Joe, who is also from an educated background, remarked:

I navigated it in a certain way that, you know, and I did a lot of good things to people. People used to come to my cell and said, ‘Joe, could you help me with this complaint on this form on this application?’ Uh, and I would draft things or they got refused the D Cat, and I’ll do an appeal for them. Well, I didn’t ask for any biscuits or coffee, as many others do. I just did it because, you know, I was happy to help people. Um, and that seemed to get me a kind of a lot of respect on the wing. Really respect that I wasn’t looking for.

Joe, the only archetypal ‘ideal learner’ in the sample from his schooling days, argues he did not help out in exchange for anything else, but recognised that using his knowledge and skills to be kind and good to others did earn him respect. Joe is clear that this was not a strategy on his part; however, earning a place of respect for his kind deeds was socially advantageous as he had already acknowledged in reference to his navigation of school.

Ashley on the other hand, did not enjoy people soliciting his help on the wings and instead learnt how to “play dumb” when people needed his help. Ashley, now in a role dedicated to helping others, describes how his interest in supporting young people was simply a box-ticking exercise and was just something he said to appease his parole officer and get out of prison more quickly. It was only when he was actively helping engage young people who were vulnerable to gangs in the community that he experienced any type of reward. He realised how these experiences had eventually helped him to atone for his crimes and create a more ‘prosocial’ identity. So, in Ashley’s case, the box-ticking and the strategising for an early release resulted in a more philanthropic outcome and a more community-oriented identity rather than a rational masculine identity. For other participants, the reward in helping others and the change in identity came much sooner as will be discussed in Chapter Nine.

The final area that offers some insight into how the “the educated ones” drew on a discourse of rational masculinity as a way of navigating prison was how some individuals were entrusted by the officers to break up fights. Both Tom and Joe

describe how they broke up fights both in the education department and on the wings. Joe was trusted by officers to go into other prisoners' cells to calm them down. He recalls how the officers knew it would not lead to anything "physical" if he was in there; they trusted him to resolve conflict amongst others. Tom also described a situation where the female teacher was unable to calm an upset student down, so he took it upon himself to speak to him outside the classroom. The officers chastised him as he could have put himself at risk, however he intimates they were ultimately grateful for his successful intervention.

This section has described how participants with backgrounds in technical or professional trades before prison (recruitment, education, administration) and some with more positive schooling experiences, construct a masculine identity of rationality and how it relates to all areas of their prison life, including their engagement with prison education, interactions with authorities and social relations on the wing. Although participants' capabilities and former identities had a largely positive effect on their relations in both social and educative spaces, it also caused tensions for those who had previously held hegemonic power as they realised that their new roles were subordinate and lacking gravitas.

“You Can’t Show Any Signs OF Weakness Because People Will Just be on Ya”: Masculine Identity and Risk Management of Educational Vulnerabilities in Prison

The following sections focus on participants who struggled at school and subsequently also had problems with prison education. In stark contrast to the participants discussed in the previous section, these individuals moved away from prison education and experienced difficulties with the vulnerability that educational weaknesses can engender. This section focuses on one of the most disaffected participants who was excluded from school at the age of 12. As described in Chapter Six, Connor's experience of schooling was characterised by truancy and alcohol abuse from a young age, after his mum died. He developed a tough masculine identity on the notorious estate where he grew up and described himself and his classmates as a "bunch of lunatics." The following is an excerpt from an interview with Connor. Although his support worker described him as dyslexic, Connor was reluctant to talk about any LDDs and when he did discuss these issues, he used the

third person. In the following extract, he discusses how a “geezer” might be feeling in the classroom:

AM: So, were there ever, did you see, in the classroom, if someone was struggling with something, were they supported by other people in the classroom?

Connor: Yeah, people will help ya, if you see somebody struggling you know what I mean. Cus, people don't like to see people struggling because. like, you know what I mean, the geezer could be feeling a bit embarrassed, so you go over, he won't ask for help, he ain't gonna ask, and he won't ask a teacher, but you can pick up on him, and you're sitting in the class, instead of being on the teacher's side of it, do you know what I'm saying?

AM: Yeah. So, would they, why wouldn't they ask for help?

Connor: Sign of weakness, innit? Sign of weakness.

AM: Okay. And is that something, is that like a prison mentality do you think?

Connor: Yeah

AM: Where do you think that comes from?

Connor: Only the strong survive. It's always been that way. Law of the land in jail. Back to the grass roots of it, only the strong survive and it's engrained in prison culture, it's changing now, but it's always the way it used to be.

AM: Okay. And that sort of permeates everything including the education department?

Connor: Yeah everywhere.

AM: It's just that mentality of you have to be strong?

Connor: Yeah.

Connor, had a tough start in life on a notorious estate in a city in Ireland, and was addicted to alcohol and heroin by his early teens. He pathologises himself and fellow classmates as a “bunch of lunatics” and after having being excluded from school for the final time at the age of 12, he missed out on building central educational capabilities. Although Connor never directly comments on this, he talks at length about educational vulnerability amongst men in prison, nearly always in the third person, but sometimes slipping into the first person throughout his narrative. Connor is, in many ways, the embodiment of tough masculinity and he describes how his younger self grew tough in the face of bullies both on the street and in young offenders' institutes.

The exchange above demonstrates Connor's belief that asking for help in a classroom setting is a sign of weakness, and weakness in prison is something to be

avoided. Research suggests stoicism and self-control are integral to surviving adult prison life and fitting in, described in some studies as projecting an image of toughness, or ‘wearing a mask’ to hide deeper vulnerabilities (De Viggiani, 2012). Vulnerability, Karp (2010) suggests “provides an opening for exploitation or domination” (p. 78). Ricciardelli’s (2015) study suggests that a careful negotiation of a tough, controlled outward persona is essential to ensuring individuals’ safety, stating that: “he who appears the least physically, emotionally and legally vulnerable and is best able to manage the uncertainty of prison life holds the most empowered position in relation to other prisoners” (p. 492).

Connor feels that exposing educational disadvantage would be a mistake and would expose an individual as being “weak.” He remarks:

It's like if you get somebody that's, like, 30 years of age and they've gone through life without being able to read and write, do you know what I mean [pause] it must scare the shit out of them. You know, especially in a jail environment, you know [pause] I mean, where you can't show any signs of weakness because people will just be on ya, you know what I mean? The mentality of an inmate as well. You don't show that because people might think I'm a bit slow or a bit dumb or a bit weak.

In this passage, Connor equates being “slow” or “dumb”, in other words, having educational vulnerabilities, as being “weak.” As discussed in Chapter Three, weakness or vulnerability increases the chances of prisoners being targeted by bullies, and in order to risk-manage one’s safety, this passage suggests education may be avoided altogether. Connor begins his reflections by using the third person, and talks about other people’s experiences of fear. In the final sentence, he then slips and uses the first person, and unintentionally concedes that he is referring to himself. Connor’s experience demonstrates a markedly different relationship to prison education to those discussed earlier, and suggests that those with poor experiences of schooling also struggle to engage with education in the prison space, and proceed to perform a hard masculinity rather than engage with discourses of reason or rationality.

Prison Education Processes: Influence of Educational Background on Capability to Participate in Prison Education

This section discusses further the theme of educational background and how it can influence educational capabilities in prison, including engagement with

educational processes. The assessments and induction process were more successful for those who had already developed educational capabilities. Engagement with prison education starts during the first week of prison, constituting part of induction week. Educational assessments can create barriers and cause disengagement for those who have experienced educational disadvantage or who have an unmet LDD. However, for participants who had access to good schooling, whether they enjoyed the experience of school education or not, it appears that assessments were largely a positive experience.

Tom had a comfortable middle-class upbringing and went to the local village school where he had access to a quality education. He was not interested in schoolwork, though, and his passion from a young age lay elsewhere (in the theatre, see Chapter Six). He never viewed himself as academic, so when he did well in the maths assessment in prison it gave him a “whack of confidence.” It was not long before he had teachers “fighting over him” and wanting him as a peer mentor in their classrooms. Similarly, Harry brought his teaching certificates and was asked to be a peer mentor at induction and Freddie, who enjoyed a privileged start to education, found that his maths assessment was spotted by the maths teacher who realised he had a high level of educational capability. He soon made connections with other key people in the department and engaged wherever he could. It turned out to be the “saviour” of his time inside and he developed capabilities through education including increased confidence and creativity.

For many of the ‘impossible learners’ described in Chapter Six, however, engaging in prison education was a struggle. Participants from low-income households, who had experienced educational disadvantage and had developed significant educational vulnerabilities during schooling, were instead limited in their capability to participate in prison education. When I asked participants who had poor experiences of schooling about the assessment, they seem to barely remember taking the test, and those who did simply called it “a pain in the arse” (Connor). Joel, one of the most disaffected learners in the sample, recalls his prison education journey ending at assessment. He remembered being told he was Entry Level One and would not be able to get the job he wanted on the wings as a consequence. He was then given BBC Bitesize worksheets; he left the session and never returned. Although he had multiple barriers to learning, which negatively affected his life outside of prison, he never received any help from the education department.

Induction and assessment, which is typically carried out in the first week after an individual is sentenced and imprisoned, can be a challenge for those who have not had positive educational beginnings and conducting these assessments during the first week of prison can be a challenge for any prisoner. As suggested in Speilman's (2002) report, "prisoners who have recently arrived in a jail are often anxious or distracted. They may not be in the right state of mind to carry out an assessment" (p. 10).

According to a report by His Majesty's Inspectorate of Prisons (HMIP) entitled *Life in prison: The first 24 hours in prison* (His Majesty's Inspectorate of Prisons, 2015) suicide is most likely to be attempted in the first three days after being sentenced. Clearly, is a not just that the accuracy of the test may be skewed when learners are feeling so stressed and upset, there is also the question of how humane or appropriate it is to expect individuals who have just been sentenced to prison to concentrate on an English and maths exam. This is especially likely to impact upon those who experience educational vulnerabilities and/or have not been in a classroom for many years. Evidence from participant narratives in this study suggest that the first night and first few weeks are the hardest. Tom explained:

When you're in prison at the beginning of your sentence, it's really not uncommon for people to need to put all of their energy into staying.... [pause] well, in some cases, staying alive, for the first few days, and just getting through, because definitely, I wanted to die in my first three weeks. I didn't want to kill myself. I wanted to go to bed at night and not wake up and just so it would all be over and I can't be the only one. In fact, I know I'm not the only one because I have spoken to prisoners in that situation.

As well the test being ill-timed, many individuals simply struggle to complete the assessment due to a lack of skills and knowledge. As Connor's comment in the previous section suggests, asking for help could expose an individual as "slow" or "weak", and in some prisons tests are conducted under exam conditions and the learners are not allowed to ask for help even if they wanted to. The first few weeks of a prisoner's sentence are often served in a holding prison, what Ashley describes as "the jungle." It is not a time when people will feel in a position to reach out for help; this time is dominated by survival. When I asked Tom about his experience of assessment and whether he witnessed any resistance he said: "Yeah, there were definitely people refusing to do it Shouting and swearing, but I mean nothing unusual

in prison! Certainly it didn't appear that at that stage, it was anything that teaching staff hadn't seen before.”

The data suggests that although many people in prison complete the assessments, most do not go on to engage in a maths or English course. Between April 2021 and March 2022, 56,006 prisoners completed a maths and English assessment: 16,000 went on to participate in an English or maths course, and under 5,000 completed. Sixty-one percent of the assessments were Entry Level (MoJ, 2022). As discussed in Chapter Two, there is very little research that accounts for the gap between assessments and engagement. I suggest that the initial assessments could cause barriers for those who have had poor experiences of school and perhaps a redesign would support better engagement of the most vulnerable (see Chapter Ten).

In the following sections, I offer further discussion and analysis on educational processes, including assessment for LDDs and how participants understood, managed and coped with (often undiagnosed) neurodiversity and LDDs. As the following sections chart, some who had experienced challenging starts also found ways to engage with education and progress through their sentences, despite the significant setbacks and in some cases against seemingly insurmountable odds.

Further Barriers to Educational Engagement: Negotiating Neurodiversity, Mental Health and LDDs

Since 2019, it has been mandatory for people in prison to be assessed for LDDs, but the system has been criticised for being too superficial and not offering enough support to learners in the classroom once an LDD has been identified (Education Select Committee, 2022). Most prisons only screen new arrivals which can result in prisoners who began their sentences before 2019 being overlooked. The following section examines an array of barriers to engaging with prison education for those who experience LDDs. Drawing upon insights that emerged from participants' narratives, these reflections chart how individuals understood their LDDs, mental health conditions and neurodiversity. Some participants had been to prison multiple times and had never received help to overcome the barriers they faced, especially with both written and verbal communication. Others had severe and undiagnosed mental health issues, neurodiversity and LDDs which dramatically

affected their well-being and, to an extent, fuelled their offending behaviours and the development of masculine identities involving violence and toughness.

Stuart has dyslexia and describes how he struggled with anxiety at school; his teachers were worried about upsetting him and he was home schooled in the lead-up to his GCSEs. Stuart's anxieties around reading and verbal communication followed him into adulthood and affected how he navigated both court and prison systems. In one of his trials for violent assault, he describes feeling too anxious to take the stand as he was worried about what he would say and how it would sound. When Stuart reflects on his experiences in the prison classroom, his narrative is dominated by how he could not understand the learning point and how he felt the teachers were annoyed with him. This mirrors his experiences at school. He recounts: "And I just couldn't get it! I think she's getting annoyed because she wondered why I just didn't understand." Stuart goes on to describe the teaching assistant trying to explain something to him, but he "still couldn't get it". Stuart also talks about how nowadays "everyone reads in prison", except him. He says:

Everybody reads books now in jail. I don't, because I've tried and I can read. But when I can't read a big word or anything like that, or a few big words or whatever, I mean, it is in the book. I'll give up because I'm not going to understand. If I didn't know that you're not gonna get a full picture, are you?

Stuart's experiences concur with Ofsted's latest investigation into reading in prisons (Speilman, 2022). The report suggests that many learners have never received help for reading difficulties as staff are not trained to support adult literacy development, especially for those who have LDDs like dyslexia. Stuart's unmet learning difficulties, especially with written and verbal communication and connected to his untreated dyslexia, affected his confidence. A strong theme throughout his narrative was how his poor mental health, especially anxiety, and lack of confidence related to his evolving masculine identity. In his criminal trial he refused to take the stand. Stuart recalled how the local newspaper reported the judge commenting that he was not "man enough" to defend himself. Stuart was deeply hurt by this comment as he felt misunderstood by the court. He was too anxious to talk in front of lots of people, and felt he would not be able to confidently argue his case. Throughout Stuart's narrative it was clear that his former tough masculine identity was under threat, and that he was becoming increasingly insecure about whether he was

indeed “man enough” anymore. As noted in Chapter Six, he avoided my questions on education as much as possible and wanted to discuss his failing mental and physical health, failed romantic relationships and fears about ageing including whether or not he could defend himself if he was attacked. As a prolific violent offender who is approaching old age, Stuart’s poor educational capabilities led to an insecure learner identity, and education appeared yet another source of disappointment and perceived failure. He did not receive help in prison to overcome the challenges posed by his dyslexia and his reading remained a source of difficulty. As Speilman (2022) comments, “prisoners with the greatest need to improve their reading generally received the least support” (p. 1).

Similarly to Stuart, Joel also openly discussed his mental health status and learning disorders stemming from childhood. His narrative appeared to show how a failure to identify and effectively manage LDDs and mental health disorders in both school and prison greatly affected his offender behaviour. Although he says he has never received a formal diagnosis, he believes he has bipolar disorder and/or schizophrenia, two conditions his mother also experiences. He talks openly about how he is unable to control his temper and feels his “head is expanding” unless he lashes out when he is angry. He also suffers from anxiety and has a stutter which was evident throughout the interview. His violent tendencies began in his school days, although many of the details from that time in his life are hazy. Joel’s violence and underlying mental vulnerabilities are discussed in the Chapter Eight, but what is important to note here is that Joel’s poor educational capabilities and unsupported LDDs exacerbated the challenges he experienced in trying to maintain his well-being and functioning in society.

Although Joel was constantly moved on from prison to prison due to “safety issues” (other people’s safety), he describes a sense of belonging in prison and found instead that life on the outside was difficult to navigate. As described in Chapter Six, was excluded from mainstream education in Year 8 and learnt vocational trades in both formal and informal contexts. After securing a well-paid Team Leader position at a landscaping firm in his early twenties, he was fined by the HMRC for not paying his taxes. With very low levels of literacy and numeracy and no support, the basics of budgeting and how to handle money were extremely challenging for him. He was earning “good money” in this job but staying in hotels and eating out as he did not have a place to live. When a friend pointed out how

much money he was wasting and that with the debt to the 'Inland Revenue' he would soon run out of money, he became depressed and suicidal and sought help from a secure mental health facility. Like Stuart, Joel did not want to talk about education and the nature of his LDDs. Joel was never screened for LDDs (that he remembers) but he continues to find it difficult to concentrate and his violent tendencies have been the main barrier to progress in all contexts. The lack of LDD screening processes in prison, a failure to diagnose mental health issues and barriers to engaging with education resulted in prison education being meaningless to Joel. For a prisoner like Joel who is subject to a Multi-Agency Public Protection Arrangement (MAPPA), the employability model of education was not going to be helpful in reducing his reoffending rate. He had many jobs and lost them all due to his temper and violent outbursts. It appeared that Joel needed an intervention to help understand and support his LDDs and mental health issues.

Tom, who now works in mental health with people vulnerable to offending due to mental health or other risk factors, remarks on what he calls "the circle of prison life". He observed one person he met in prison who had Borderline Personality Disorder (BPD) receiving his medication in the morning to "knock him out" and that was the extent of his treatment plan. He would sleep for the whole day and night. When the medication was late or he was not able to access it, he would "smash up his cell." Tom commented on how this man was languishing in his cell with no hope of rehabilitation. He further comments on people who experience LDDs and the intersection with mental health:

I didn't see any provision for teaching assistants, or, or people specifically working with prisoners with learning difficulties... Umm, and, and so there's people that get left behind in the same way that I guess they do in mainstream education as well, if it's not picked up on, or not managed, but certainly within prisons, there is an abundance of mental health problems. There's absolutely going to be a load of people getting released who haven't had the support they needed in prison.

Joel is one of these people. He does not have the resources or support to access treatment for his mental health problems or diagnosis of his LDDs, instead he navigates prison and life in the community through asserting a tough and violent masculinity. This leads to repeat offending and 'revolving door imprisonment' (Maguire, 2021).

Overcoming Barriers: Diagnosis and Beyond

This section will discuss two participants who did receive support for their LDDs and neurodiversity in prison, or at least comprehensive and professional screening which led to an understanding of the limitations they had experienced throughout their lives. These processes enabled them to move forward and expand their educational capabilities, and also demonstrate practices and beliefs related to alternative gendered subjectivities. The report from the Education Select Committee (2022), recommends that further funding should be made available for educational psychologists to assess the needs of people in prison, facilitating advancement beyond the initial screening discussed in the previous section. As people in prison are more likely to suffer from complex mental health and learning needs and disorders, a trained specialist is needed to help diagnose learners' behaviours, disorders, and limitations with learning.

This section focuses on the narratives of two participants – Doug and Martin – who finally received help and understanding for their LDDs and neurodiversity, and how they were subsequently able to move forwards with their education, careers, identities and desistance process. In their narratives they also demonstrated a move away from toughness and demonstrated a more emotional, reflective and introspective understanding of themselves.

Doug was clear that prison education held no value for him throughout his sentences. He recalled his pad-mates bringing worksheets back to the cell that were designed for children (“the cat sat on the mat”) and he could not see how it would help him progress. Although he felt concerned at the time that he did not hold any qualifications after exclusion from school, he could not envision how functional skills would help him. Doug describes how things changed when he moved to a therapeutic centre as part of his sentence plan, and this is where he met Meriam (pseudonym). Meriam was a retired teacher who was only there “for the love of teaching.” She never made him “write stuff down” and she was the first teacher to tell him he was intelligent, “one of the most intelligent in the class.” She felt, however, that there was a disconnect between what Doug said and what Doug wrote. He was articulate, expressive and knowledgeable during discussion and debate, but she said there was a “real kind of disconnect between how you say and understand and express yourself and I suspect that you need to be assessed. I suspect you've got something like dyslexia and dyspraxia.” She encouraged him to be screened for

learning disabilities and this was a turning point for Doug. He remarks: “When I got that educational psychologist report and all these things came together. It explained a lot.”

Doug felt almost vindicated by the report from the educational psychologist. As discussed in Chapter Five, Doug struggled with multiple unmet learning needs and spent much of his schooling truanting and being excluded. In his childhood he recalls being called “clumsy”, but he knows now that it was connected to having dyspraxia. Doug describes having dyslexia as being a “nightmare”, but that knowledge of this disorder actually drove him to work harder in his educational journey. He says, “it [the LDDs] gives me an almost obsessive, not giving up kind of drive to do things. And I suppose that’s combined with my addictive personality. I’m addicted to getting this stuff right.” Doug entered an access course for HE, and went on to do a degree, then a Masters and eventually achieved a PhD with no corrections; he describes it as a “bonkers journey” which clearly began with Meriam, her supportive classroom and finally being assessed by a professional.

Martin’s schooling is also discussed in Chapter Six: his struggles with teachers who could not hold his attention, and how he began abusing drugs instead of going into a classroom where he felt he did not belong. Martin talked about the psychosis he experienced as a young man, connected to the drug misuse and the barriers he faced throughout his life due to undiagnosed ADHD. He finally underwent a psychiatric examination completed during his time in prison and the assessment revealed he had “Hyperkinetic disorder”, which is an adult form of ADHD. He realised his consumption of cocaine had been helping him self-medicate the undiagnosed disorder and for the first time he was able to understand why he did not fit in and why he behaved the way he did. He comments:

It wasn’t ‘these are all the things that are wrong with you, and you’re fucked’, it was ‘these are the things that we see you need to work on’. And I was like ‘alright, brilliant’. I always knew that. I’ve obviously always been into everything, all the time. Quite erratic. My mum used to call me lightning when I was a kid, so I made my own little sign up for ADHD.

Martin had a lightning tattoo on his cheek, and it was his “sign” for his ADHD. He described that having the knowledge about himself enabled him to understand why he had abused cocaine for so many years and led to much of his offending. He realised he was driven by stimulus and slowly but surely found strategies to control

his erratic behaviour rather than returning to drugs. Martin is a plasterer by trade and has entrepreneurial aspirations to develop a profitable business. Similar to Doug, he perceived that his diagnosis revealed how his brain works and he realised that he is only motivated by what is stimulating to him. As described in Chapter Six, this created challenges for him in school classroom and probably led to his poor results, but he also commented that he has “110% focus” for what he is interested in. Martin talked at length about his plastering business and how he had coaching on budgeting for a business in prison. He was enthusiastic, telling me about his plans for the future and how he would manage profit and loss. This appears to be the opposite of Joel who never had help with his LDDs and mental health problems, and struggled with budgeting to the point he lost all his money, which resulted in a mental health crisis.

Both Doug and Martin demonstrated a depth of understanding and introspection regarding how their LDDs and neurodiversity had impacted their sense of self and well-being. In their different ways, both recognised their vulnerabilities and could talk about them openly and articulately. Due to Martin’s appearance – tattoos on his face and neck, being tall and muscular – he said he was often mistaken for being in a London-based gang and others in prison often thought he was dangerous. Martin remarks how he was not interested in the hustling, violence and drugs on the wing; instead, his narrative described his search to understand himself, especially his ADHD and drug abuse, and he was particularly emotionally fluent, discussing his own difficulties specifically, and other men’s vulnerabilities in general. The following is an excerpt from our discussion on men and vulnerability:

AM: So, do you feel, men who have experienced time inside, they’re not seen as vulnerable in any way?

Martin: Not at all, not at all. They’re classed as criminals, and they’re locked back up again. But obviously it’s no different, which is what I’m trying to make the link to. It’s no different to me being in a classroom at school, not understanding something, and you just get locked away. Plus, there’s the stigma with men who say, “You alright?” “Yeah, I’m fine.” I’m not talking to you about mental health issues, I’m not telling you I’m struggling. I’m living the dream. But inside we’re dying.”

Martin’s analogy to the school classroom is an illuminating one as it refers to the exclusionary practices of schooling discussed in Chapter Six, and how he

stopped asking for help and developed a self-reliant, tough masculinity to navigate the adult world. Martin felt that women caught up in the justice system are automatically seen as vulnerable, but men are not. He describes how female prison leavers are given priority to be housed after leaving prison and then describes his years of homelessness and the violence he was vulnerable as a very young man. He argues he was vulnerable and the “thousands of men in prison” who are also vulnerable “just need someone to talk to”; however, he then concedes: “but obviously, the budget won’t stretch that far.” At the same time Martin talked about individual responsibility and how his crime led to pain for everyone around him. Martin is able to talk about individual and societal responsibility and how his vulnerability formed part of this.

Doug was also articulate and emotionally fluent when discussing his upbringing and was able to articulate how he felt about the barriers his LDDs and neurodiversity had caused. Doug describes his “deep, deep, deep-rooted feelings of inadequacy and stuff that is not unique to me. I know a lot of people go through it, but it was real, profound, kind of deeply entrenched fear of failure.” Similar to Martin, Doug is able to describe his own journey and relate it to the experiences of others. It appeared that Martin’s and Doug’s journeys through diagnosis supported them to expand their educational capabilities and move towards desistance more easily, once they knew the barriers they faced, and how to overcome them. This shaping and evolving of learner identity reveals the performance of a gender subjectivity where emotional revelations are not stigmatised or taboo and can be discussed openly. I discussed to what extent I influence this emotional openness in the interview space in Chapter Five, with specific reference to how some participants performed tough masculinities throughout their narratives. Both Doug and Martin transformed from ‘impossible learners’ to ‘ideal learners’ and described how once they understood the barriers they experienced with learning (inattention etc.) they were able to channel their hyperfocus positively, and notably, they would only focus on what they were interested in.

Sadly, other participants struggling with similar barriers but who never received support to overcome them did not talk with the same introspection and their narrative continued to be littered with a projection of tough masculinity, insecurity and anxiety. An interesting point to understand is the difference a formal diagnosis and professional help can make to the life of someone struggling with the barriers of

undiagnosed LDDs, mental health disorders and neurodiversity in both prison and later in the community. This discussion mirrors the trajectories of participants in schooling who never receive help or intervention; this affects their journeys away from education and further into criminal pathways. In adulthood, participants who do not benefit from interventions in connection with their LDDs or mental health continue to struggle and move further away from education and desistance. Instead, they invest in tough masculine identities and as this keeps them safe, it is productive in their navigation of prison and life on the outside. Those who received a diagnosis and professional help in young adulthood were able to engage better with education and learning once they understood their barriers to participating in education, and eventually they engaged and, in some cases, excelled. Despite using tough masculinities through schooling to navigate peer relations and exclusion, they seem to move towards a gender subjectivity that is characterised by emotional fluency, reflection, empathy and introspection.

“You Can’t Kill My Creativity- I’ll Get Out of Here One Day”: Capabilities Through Education

Most of this chapter has focused on the capability to meaningfully engage in prison education, discussing the barriers but also the factors that made flourishing in education possible or impossible. This section focuses on capabilities *through* education and how prison pedagogies can influence masculinities in the carceral space including a discussion of the tensions, resistance and creativity that participants embodied and presented in their narratives.

As discussed in Chapter Six, many of the participants engaged in resistant masculinities in teenage and early adulthood for various reasons, and in retaliation against a system that did not nurture them. The ‘impossible learners’ engaged in a range of ‘bad boy’ behaviours (Connell, 2005) including delinquency, truanting from school, street violence and experimentation with drugs and alcohol. In Maguire’s (2021) *Male, Jail, Failed*, he argues that prison cultures engender and exacerbate destructive behaviours and identities, and do not provide alternative resources for men ‘to do’ masculinity differently. I have argued that participants who had access to educational psychologist assessment and support were able to understand and move on better from destructive masculine behaviours, and this directly shaped their learner identities and gender subjectivities.

Some participants found creative expression in arts-based subjects in prison, most often independently from the education department. As discussed in the Chapter Two, prison education in England and Wales is based on a vocational model (Nichols, 2016) where the main aim is to upskill learners in readiness for employability. The focus in most prison education departments (in adult male prisons) is on skills for work in construction, scaffolding, etc. and largely supporting men from working-class backgrounds into blue-collar work. The main indices of success are completion and pass rates of courses, the relationship between completion of an educational course and a lower reoffending rate and how obtaining a job is also connected to lower rates of recidivism (Davies et al, 2017).

Some critics suggest that an employability model of prison education is symbolic of “an authoritarian understanding of rehabilitation” (Higgins, 2020, p. 48). and warn that measuring transformation in prison is almost impossible. Behan (2014) suggests instead that prison education should help learners “cope with their sentence”, limit “the damage” inflicted by the institution and “build on students’ strengths” (p. 29). He is also critical of the entanglement of education with the institution of prison and cautions that educationalists should be hesitant to become embroiled in the “murky business of measurement and evaluation” (p. 27) and should instead focus on how they can facilitate the process of moving towards contributions and identities which are commensurate with positive change.

Having reflected on these critiques from Chapter Two, this section focuses on how participants found ways of developing tools to cope with their sentences and mental health issues and found ways to participate in learning, but on their own terms. The following discussion focuses on Martin and Brett’s time in prison, and evidences how they found ways to use art as a coping mechanism, but also to build on their interest in creativity. It would not be possible to measure the following stories using standardised methods – participation, completion, qualifications etc. – so it is only in the exploration of their narratives and experiences that moving on from limiting behaviours can be understood.

“Art brought me to a different place.”

Both Brett and Martin suffered from untreated and severe psychosis during their sentence(s) and used art to relieve the symptoms and the ‘pains of imprisonment’ (Sykes, 2020). Both chose to pursue their own art projects, mostly

away from the education department, in their cells and “develop tools” to survive, and eventually thrive. Brett’s positive relationship with art began in prison during his early sentences in Ireland and became a diversion from his harsh and difficult reality. Brett describes suffering from severe and untreated psychosis while awaiting trial as well as enduring the classic ‘pains of imprisonment’, especially the guilt of not fulfilling the role of being a partner and father.

Brett describes engaging with different types of art during various prison sentences. At one point, his life was “live, eat, sleep, dream art, which was great! It took me to a different place.” Brett found that he needed to “develop tools” to cope with the severe psychosis, and art helped him escape the harsh reality of prison life. He credits art being the “outlet of his psychosis.” He also describes completing a qualification in art in one prison which was “more academic”, but he found this “less interesting” and preferred “free rein” to emulate the artists that inspired him. Brett talks about lots of different artists that inspired him, but especially the work of Francis Bacon and the genre of “outsider art”. An icon in “outsider art” and known for his raw imagery and emotionally charged works, Bacon’s paintings provided Brett solace and he enjoyed producing paintings of his own in the same style. Brett is clear that although he engaged in some formal art lessons, the qualifications held little meaning and it was losing himself in creativity that helped him survive prison life. There is very little on paper (apart from the art Brett produced) to suggest success in the bureaucratic sense. However, his description of how engaging with art lifted the terrible and sometimes frightening symptoms of psychosis and allowed a diversion from the pain of not fulfilling the role of father/partner is evidence of how powerful learning can be for disaffected prisoners if it is done on their own terms and distanced from the institution of the prison.

Martin also talked about coping with psychosis and the ‘pains of imprisonment’ by creating art in his cell. Unlike Brett, Martin did not have any art resources and instead used household objects in his cell to create a fort – matchsticks, an eggbox, a toothpaste tube, etc. He made a fort to represent his current predicament and his fight against addiction. He found it therapeutic and healing to represent his journey in this way. He entered a national award programme for people who produce art in prison and won. Martin talks in detail about his fort project and how the different parts of the building represented different parts of him and the challenges he had faced in his life: the canon represents the *choice* to be

angry and explosive and the two gargoyles represent the two toxic relationships he had been, for example. He remarks: "All these different things, when you lock me up, like, you couldn't kill my creativity, I'll get out of here one day. I'll take one day at a time, one matchstick at a time." So, one matchstick at a time, one day at a time, Martin got better and was able to overcome his addiction to cocaine and his creative endeavours clearly helped him understand himself better and kept him moving forward.

Brett and Martin also commented on vocational trades and their feelings about manual labour as a career pathway after prison. Brett was clear that he was not interested in blue-collar work. He recalls doing manual labour jobs in his younger days and after being released from his last sentence, he was fortunate enough to have time in the family home to recover from prison and work out his next steps. He decided to work with a friend in puppetry and helped students in primary schools make their own puppets. He was clear that it did not matter to him what he did, as long as it was creative. Brett is now a service manager in an ex-offender charity and his journey with this organisation will be discussed in Chapter Nine. Martin also told me about his journey to become a plasterer. After walking out of a maths test in college when originally studying to become an electrician, he walked past a plastering class and became interested in what they were doing. After speaking with the course tutor, Martin enrolled on the course and became a dedicated student. His tutor described him as "the unicorn" of the class as he was so enthusiastic and studious. Martin explains again, if he is stimulated by something, "you will have 110% of my hyperfocus until I go to sleep." He went on to become a plasterer and has ambitions to create a business that will one day employ and train ex-offenders. Martin talks about his trade with knowledge and passion, and how these skills will help him find a job now that he has been released from prison.

Both Martin and Brett demonstrated identities and behaviours related to resistant masculinities in the past, but found a way to move away from their destructive behaviours in prison. By focusing on their own projects, and building on their passions, talents and strengths, they were able to navigate the challenges of prison life, especially the symptoms of psychosis, and to move forward positively after release. The capability to be creative, Nussbaum (2000) argues, is a central capability and being able to have freedom to express themselves without the

constraint of attending and passing courses led to enhanced well-being for two men who could previously have been described as ‘impossible learners’.

Other participants expressed an interest in creativity and experienced various tensions and challenges stemming from former protest and tough identities. Matty, for example, described his love and passion for music. He became a peer mentor for the music class and even began to DJ on the prison radio, but he describes facing criticism from his peers and feared he was being perceived as “screwboyish” (‘screws’ are prison officers in prison vocabulary). He recalls:

And I suppose that's quite not like [*pause*] like a nerdy thing to do, but it's a bit like screwboyish. I mean, it's a bit like... Like my mate Dennis who I was padded up with. He's a good friend of mine on the outside, you know? He's like, ‘Why are you doing that? That radio shit needs to stop... stop doing that radio shit.’ I was like, ‘No, man, I like it. I like it.’

Matty’s engagement with education was perceived as an engagement with the prison, and his protest identity came under threat amongst his peers and caused a conflict for Matty as a consequence. Perceptions of being “screwboyish” could render him an excluded Other as it is perceived as an effeminate, subordinate masculinity, similar to being a “swot” or “teacher’s pet” discussed in Chapter Three. Negotiating educational capabilities and displaying enthusiasm was a tightrope walk for Matty in prison, as it is for many in schooling, performing ‘laddish’ masculine identities.

This section has discussed how some participants who used practices relating to resistant working-class masculinities to navigate their younger years turned to art and creativity to survive their sentences and the pains of imprisonment. Importantly, the creativity was mostly undertaken away from the education department, but when some did engage with the ‘establishment’, it could cause tension amongst peers.

“I’ve Been Bullied All My Life”: Education as Escape and Vulnerable Masculinities

Despite participants in the previous section creating learning spaces away from the prison education department, for some, the department was viewed as a “haven” or sanctuary in prison, especially an escape from the “hustling” and bullying that occurred on the wings. This section discusses how prison education gave participants much needed time away from the wings, but they could not be totally immune from vulnerability in hypermasculine spaces and found themselves the

targets of aggressive masculine behaviour. I argue in this section that prison education is not the 'magic bullet' that it is often heralded to be in some sociopolitical contexts. Although it can support the development of capabilities, it does not immunise men, particularly vulnerable men, from being pathologised as the excluded Other and being victim to violence and the hegemony in the masculine prison hierarchy.

This final section focuses on Cassie; a 57-year-old former miner from a working-class background. As a child, as discussed in Chapter Six, he was short and had a squint, which was the cause of bullying. In adulthood, he is tall, well-built and has tattoos on his arms. He also has a passion for reading and literature. Cassie "hated" school; the teachers, the bullies and some of the subjects, especially maths. After leaving school at 16 years old, he worked in the pits (coal mines) until he was made redundant after the mine closures of the 1980s. He went on to hold a managerial position in a factory and remarked that he enjoyed his job and being in a position of responsibility. He never talked about his crime, and in line with my ethical protocol, I never asked, but he told me that he served a seven-year sentence. He had been on parole for about a year at the time of the interview, in August 2022.

The role that prison education plays in Cassie's time in prison is significant to how his capability set is both expanded and reduced, and how this in turn has had dramatic consequences on his well-being, agency and aspirations. Cassie served his sentence in two prisons; two years in the first, and five in the second. In both prisons, Cassie was bullied. His first experience of prison education had a positive impact on Cassie and it expanded his capabilities, in terms of knowledge and skills acquisition. It also increased his confidence as a learner as well as serving as an escape from the more turbulent parts of the prison such as on the wings, and gaining a position of respect within the education department.

Cassie describes the first prison education department as "really, really good." He engaged in an array of subjects, including revisiting maths and English. He became a peer mentor and coached learners who were struggling. He enjoyed helping them to learn and this position of responsibility bolstered his self-esteem: "I were proud of meself for doing it." He would also tell the learners he was proud of the progress they were making. This experience led him to become a "listener" on the wing where people who were having problems could confide in him. Cassie also enrolled on a creative writing course and had a good relationship with the teacher,

who he admired and wanted to impress. As well as being “absolutely brilliant”, she was also critical of his writing and challenged him to move forward. His confidence increased to the point where he applied and obtained funding to do an English Literature degree.

Subsequently, Cassie was abruptly moved to another prison two years into his sentence. People in prison are often moved to other prisons with very short notice and have no power or agency in the decision-making process. The move often disrupts all aspects of their prison life, including any engagement or progress they have made with prison education (Education Committee, 2022b). Cassie described the prison he was moved to as “shocking.” The staff had a “bums on seats” mentality, where they insisted that Cassie take qualifications he did not need. In the assessment, he describes having the Level Two peer mentoring certificate in his hand, but they insisted that he needed to do Level One. After pressurising him to do other qualifications he did not need, followed by a maths assessment that reduced his confidence further as he became flustered by the questions, he quit prison education and walked out of the department never to return. He also gave up on his dream of doing an English degree, despite having secured the funding. Instead, he worked in the workshops and this had serious consequences for Cassie and his well-being.

It is difficult for Cassie to talk about the bullying he experienced throughout his life. As described in Chapter Six, he was bullied for his short stature, ‘sticky-out’ ears and having a squint. He is hesitant to give details of the nature of the bullying in prison, but he is candid about the dramatic effect on his psychological well-being: “I got bullied to the point where I were going to commit suicide. I actually made the noose and hid it in my cell and hid it that well, I knew nobody would find it.” He recounts (with a trembling voice) how he eventually decided against killing himself as he had researched that it could take more than 10 minutes for him to choke; breaking one’s neck is hard from a prison noose hanging from the window. He decided instead to approach the mental health team in the prison and seek help instead.

In the second prison, Cassie had nowhere to escape to. He said the bullies spent their time in the workshops (“being the big I am”) not the education departments and he no longer had anywhere to go. When I asked Cassie about the bravado he witnessed from the bullies and if he felt the bullies could have benefited

from being in education he said: “Yes. Give your brain something to do, rather than all this anger and violence.” Cassie made one friend in the workshops, but he was released after a year. He was then alone for the next three years serving the rest of his sentence and quickly spiralled into depression and suicide planning and ideation.

Cassie had two radically different experiences with education during his time in prison. In the first prison, the education department was staffed with inspiring teachers and Cassie developed his capability set, especially enhancing his agency and developing aspiration and hope for the future. The department was a place where he was making a difference and he felt he belonged. In the second prison, the culture of the education department was very different; it was a “bums on seats” mentality, where the department was operating on a “draw down” system, instead of placing the needs of the learner at the centre of the journey. Quality educational experiences were offered in the first prison but not in the second; this affected Cassie’s vulnerability in the hierarchical power system of the all-male prison environment, and his low status had negative consequences on his well-being.

Maguire (2019) argues that the focus in the vast majority of studies on prison masculinities is on hegemonic or dominant masculinities, and marginalised or subordinate identities are often neglected despite being “equally important to understand” (p. 2). This discussion therefore contributes to a small but growing body of literature on vulnerable masculinities in prison and offers analysis of how education can feature in the lives of those with excluded Other identities in prison settings.

Stoicism and self-control are integral to surviving adult prison life and fitting in, described in some studies as projecting an image of toughness, or ‘wearing a mask’ to hide deeper vulnerabilities (De Viggiani, 2012). Vulnerability in the form of public displays of emotion, or the opposite – withdrawal and avoiding prison social life entirely – suggests prisoners struggle to successfully navigate the social side of their sentences. Murray’s (2020) ethnographic study maps the gendered discourses of young men in a secure unit in Belfast. Similarly, his study finds that those unable to cope with their sentences, amongst other behaviours, were withdrawn from social life on the wing, and were often subjected to bullying and stigmatisation. This mirrors Cassie’s experience:

Cassie: I was one of those I weren't interested in coming out. I didn't come out my cell at [*name of prison*] much really, I just did my own thing.

AM: Yeah. Did you think. I know the bullying was difficult, but people mostly left you alone to get on with it?

Cassie: Um, you got some that will leave you alone, and then you get others that because you shut yourself away. it also makes you a target.

In the second prison, where Cassie served most of his sentence, he found himself at the bottom of the prison hierarchy, with very little resource or access to social power. While in the first prison, his position in the education department gave him status and social worth, in the second prison, he is “one of those” (which suggests he was not alone behaving this way) who did not socialise with the other prisoners. Participants in Murray’s (2020) study suggest that being withdrawn was perceived as not ‘doing your time’ properly and not being in control of yourself or surroundings. Rather than keeping busy or making friends, being alone in your cell suggested life was a struggle behind the door. This perceived vulnerability made individuals a target for bullying and stigma, and these men are labelled “heavy whackers” (Murray, 2020, p. 1) – the whack being the sentence, and the heaviness being the weight of the ‘pains of imprisonment’. It is the shutting oneself away, and therefore a perception of an inability to cope or control one’s surroundings that is the mark of subordinate masculinity. These are the reasons for Cassie becoming a target.

Cassie’s time in prison was painful for him to recount; he was being bullied in the AP where the interview was taking place and his struggles with anxiety and depression were ongoing. Cassie’s story, alongside the other narratives presented in this section, indicates the importance of the practices of educational departments and how the processes of engagement and assessment can make a marked difference in whether a person in prison, especially a vulnerable person, engages with education.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have mapped how experiences of prison education and relationships in prison are influenced by and influence gender subjectivity and educational capabilities. I begin by offering in-depth analysis of how men negotiate gender regimes in prison, and how educational backgrounds are central to unpacking constraints and overcoming barriers to participation. For some, educational backgrounds and capabilities played a central role in how they navigated

homosocial relations, engaged with prison education, coped with the 'pains of imprisonment', and responded to prison bureaucracy. Insights support the literature that prison education can offer an alternative emotional climate to the hypermasculine wings, and some viewed education as a lifeline and a saviour. I have offered analysis on how those with better experiences of schooling were able to develop their educational capabilities in prison more effectively than those who had experienced academic disadvantage, struggle and inequalities. Some participants also expressed fear about displaying weakness in educational spaces, and becoming a target for bullies. LDDs, neurodiversity and mental health were prominent themes in participant narratives. In my analysis, I demonstrate how those who did not receive support for undiagnosed LDDs remained disengaged from education, and were more likely to be repeat offenders. I also chart the transformation that occurred when participants did receive diagnoses and meaningful support with LDDs. This positively impacted gender performativity, moving away from toughness and towards reflection, introspection and empathy, especially in connection with their learning.

Further, I describe participants journeys and engagement with the creative arts and how alternative educational provision can support those who are suffering severe mental health issues such as psychosis. Beyond the vocational model which is currently offered in formal prison education settings, I offer a critique on the limiting view of centring an employability model. Lastly, I map the journey of a participant who embodies a vulnerable masculinity and who is targeted by bullies. His testimony demonstrates the importance of prison education processes, and how offering a safe, purposeful educational environment for all students, and especially those with LDDs and vulnerabilities, can make a significant difference to the well-being and desistance journeys of adult men in prison.

Chapter Eight

“Things are Falling Apart”: ‘Sticky’ Masculinities, Violent Trajectories, Escaping Vulnerability and (Dis)investments in Education

Introduction

Violence emerged as an important theme across prison leavers’ interviews, deepening the complexity of the relationship between gender subjectivity and educational journeys. This chapter investigates the multidimensional nature of the violent behaviours and episodes presented in the narratives, highlighting the intersection between violence, subjectivity, identity negotiation and education. Prison leavers’ accounts of violence varied considerably with some participants recalling isolated events such as gang-related street violence and corporal punishment, whereas others describe routine and repeated violence in childhood as well as extreme but normalised violent acts planned and perpetrated in prison. For some, violent events appeared to hold little significance, but for others, their lives were strongly influenced by the violence they engaged in and experienced, shaping their gender subjectivities and influencing entry into criminal trajectories. The types of violence discussed in this chapter are often sensationalised through media discourses (Chibnall, 1977), or quantified in penal discourses (MoJ, 2020). The approach in this chapter focuses less on the physical acts of violence and instead draws attention to the “ripples of violence” (Bufacchi & Gilson, 2016, p. 112) in participants lives, exploring “the mundane, corrosive and often hidden practices that imprint their mark on gendered bodies and subjectivities” (Parkes & Conolly, 2013, p. 5).

This chapter further situates its analysis in the participants’ gender performances during interview where, for some participants, investments in tough masculinity were supported by violent behaviours and shored up their identity presentations through the retelling of violent events. These identities, at other times, were challenged and contested as increasingly candid reflections revealed beliefs, practices and insecurities that were not always commensurate with previous hegemonic discursive positions. ‘Hardman’ identities unravelled as participants’ perspectives on their ageing, inadequate or a perception of their ‘failing’ bodies and

minds contrasted with the violent and hegemonic versions of themselves. Conversely, participants who experienced early educational success and 'ideal/acceptable' learner identities, describe hypermasculine and extreme responses to unexpected, isolated and unwanted violent encounters on the street and in prison. I argue that further theorisation is needed to unpack the range of prison leavers' violent experiences, and understand how subjectivity, identity negotiation and bodies feature in conversations about violent encounters.

In line with my ethical protocol (see Chapter Five), I did not ask participants direct questions about their experiences of being victims of violence at any point in their lives, especially in their childhoods. My experience of working in adult male prisons afforded me an understanding of the abuse that many men in prison have already experienced, and I anticipated the interview space being a place for participants to talk about traumatic childhood and adult experiences if they wanted to. This decision was made to protect participants' well-being during their interviews and ensure that the researcher-participant relationship remained a non-invasive process. It also stemmed from an understanding that these recollections would flow naturally from the conversation and that participants would volunteer information if they felt it was relevant to their story. Consequently, some participants engaged in unprompted, lengthy descriptions of violent crimes and encounters as well as painful recollections of violence experienced in their childhoods. During the section of the interview which focused on prison experiences, I asked all participants: a) if they had witnessed violence in prison, and; b) who is most the vulnerable to violence in prisons. Some participants used these questions as an opportunity to discuss social hierarchies, bullying, debt and the vulnerability of prisoners as these themes connect to violence in prison. The accounts mostly described others being the perpetrators and victims of violence, though some participants candidly talked about the violent roles they had assumed and the violence they had experienced.

'Sticky masculinities': Gender Subjectivity and Violence

I begin this chapter by offering a review of the theoretical underpinnings of gender subjectivity, and offer a further frame of 'sticky masculinities' in conceptualising participants' narratives and the shaping of subjectivities. I discuss how participants' schooling experiences often involved violence and were an

essential part of emergent tough identities. These identity positions were often incommensurate with school discourses and, for some, led to feelings of alienation and isolation. A subset of participants disinvested in education after exclusion, and moved further towards criminal trajectories. I offer further analysis of the genesis of violent behaviours, including an understanding of the relationship between violent behaviour with childhood trauma, as well as the influence of peers and masculine hierarchies in school, on the street and in prison. I offer subsequent analysis on the homosocial and heteronormative relations within the prison space, and how participants recounted witnessing or perpetrating violence against vulnerable and excluded Others, behaviour which often served to distance themselves from vulnerability. Further analysis of relational masculinities offers insight into the contradictory discursive frames of violence and rehabilitation, and how participants struggled to form a consistent narrative when recounting their attitudes towards younger men in the justice system. Finally, I close this chapter by analysing one participant's interactions with me in the interview, problematising my role as the researcher, and further evidencing the complexity and pain involved in identity negotiation.

Employing the ideas of Butler (2006, 2011), Collier (1998) and specifically Youdell's (2006) metaphors of 'impossible/ideal' learners, this chapter discusses the importance of bodies, subjectivities and gender performances. The exploration of participants' gender performativity relates to the hierarchical and diverse masculine positioning in which they engage, and how violence is implicated in these positionings and hierarchies. Drawing on the work of Butler (1990), Collier (1998) investigates "how subjectivity, as the lived experience of a psychical and libidinally mapped body which gives meanings to subjects, is itself socially and culturally inscribed" (p. 24). Poststructuralist writers claim that bodies are culturally inscribed with meaning for subjects to operate successfully within a certain milieu or context. For bodies to give a convincing display of a hegemonic masculine position, for example, gender performances must be repeated over time to give the appearance of a truth or natural positioning. Butler (1990) insists, however, that there is nothing natural or organic about gender performances, and instead highlights how subjectivities become fragmented under the rigid confines of the "heterosexual matrix" (p. 47). Gender regimes seek to constrain and control bodies through compulsory framings and idealised notions of gender, and gender performances,

such as violence; these “congeal” over time, giving an appearance of truth or “naturalness” (Butler, 1990, p. 7).

As violence is a practice explicitly connected to masculine dominance and often idealised in cultural contexts, it is necessary to deconstruct how prison leavers’ experiences embody a struggle to perform a unitary identity through their narratives, and how “marks of gender” (Butler, 1990, p. 12) unravelled identity positions. I use a further conceptualisation of violent masculinity being ‘sticky’, as defined by poststructuralist researcher Berggren (2014) who explains:

Bodies culturally read as “men” are oriented toward the culturally established signs of “masculinity,” such as hardness and violence. The repeated sticking together of certain bodies and signs in this way is what creates masculine subjectivity (p. 246).

I problematise participants’ discussion of violence in the interview space and attempt to surface the complexities at the heart of shaping and re-shaping subjectivity. Researchers focusing on gender violence in different contexts have drawn attention to the active meaning-making in which subjects engage in their negotiation of multidimensional, everyday acts of violence. Shaped by the uneven distribution of economic resources that can leave lasting imprints on social, racialised and gendered bodies, these frames support an active contestation of victim discourses and focus on how subjects actively attempt identity work and contest (or support) culturally prescribed positions (Buller, 2015; Parkes, 2015). This body of research focuses on subjects as active beings, dynamically negotiating “gender norms, practices and subjectivities” (Parkes, 2015, p. 6) which may reproduce or reify violent practices, but also open up space for “negotiation, subversion and resistance” (Parkes, 2015, p. 6). Centring subjects as active meaning-makers echoes Beasley’s (2015) and Waling’s (2019) calls for a focus on subjectivity and agency when exploring violent men’s practices. In Beasley’s (2015) discussions on poststructuralist feminist reflections on violence and masculinity, she recognises the profound pressure boys experience to “conform and embody dominant models of masculinity as well as motives and strategies involved in boys’ negotiations of gender” (p. 246). These theoretical insights foreground the following discussion on participant narratives, and how the spaces of school and street can engender violent, tough masculine identities, and lead to a further disinvestment in education.

Impossible/Ideal Learners: Violence, Bodies and Educational (Dis)Investment

The discussion returns to the 'Impossible/Ideal/Othered' learner and why these terms are useful in the unpacking of violent practices and how they relate to educational journeys and subjectivities. As discussed in Chapter Six, some participants portrayed their formative years in terms of a rejection of school practices and an adoption of a tough masculine identity informed by a dominant discourse involving violence as a social performance. The 'impossible learners' described their disinvestment in formal schooling, recounting how this process typically occurred after experiencing difficulties in the classroom and also in their childhood homes. Matty, after detailing memories of school which revolved around isolation rooms and truancy concluded with: "It meant nothing... It meant nothing." Youdell (2006) argues that 'impossible' learners are pupils who are incompatible with school discourses that create 'acceptable' or 'ideal' learners. Investment in qualities such as "obedience, politeness, eagerness to learn, inquisitiveness, acquiesce to adult authority, restraint" (Youdell, 2006, p. 99) create learner identities that produce 'acceptable' learner subjectivities. Pupils who do not strive to emulate these qualities, and in fact rally against authority and do not demonstrate conformity or compliance, can be positioned as 'bad' or 'impossible' learners, and become subject to scrutiny and surveillance by school authorities. Youdell (2006) argues that school discourses intersect with "multiple discourses of sex, gender, sexuality, race, ethnicity and social class" (p. 100). Participants who embodied 'bad/impossible' learner identities in their formative years invested in tough or 'hard' masculine subject positions which became incommensurate with acceptable school discourses. In Butlerian terms, these subject positions are constituted as the excluded Other, still intelligible as human subjects, but not accepted in school discourses. (Butler, 1990).

Participant narratives reflected elements of these complex subject positions and the retelling of events appeared to serve different functions. Some used the stories to entertain in the interview, and enjoyed sharing anecdotes of their misbehaviour. For others, recounting their stories was a way of sharing painful recollections of childhood as being victims of violence in the family home, at school and on the street. Exclusionary school practices created strong feelings of alienation and isolation amongst the 'impossible' learners, with many also coping with troubled homelives in terms of distressed, violent and absent parents. The pains of exclusion from the school space led some participants to truanting, finding solace amongst

peers on the street. In both school and street cultures, participants describe an early investment in violent and tough masculinities as a response to exclusion from the school community; instead of engaging in their schooling, they spent time with similarly (dis)invested peers. Accounts of these (dis)investments were laden with masculine bodily signifiers and how bodies are moulded to fit dominant discursive practices. Butler (1993) explains how compulsory gender performances are constituted within the heterosexual matrix and how, in a bid to be accepted, the body is “bound up with signification from the start” (p. 30), and becomes a site of cultural inscription.

Participants’ descriptions of popular and hegemonic masculine discourses in street, school and young offender cultures revolved around the hierarchy of age, appearance and body size. Matty described being the youngest, but not the strongest or ‘hardest’ in his social group on the street, and he felt the need to prove himself as a consequence. He was the only one still in school in this group that formed in his local neighbourhood, and this may have further contributed to feelings of insecurity. He asserts that being “hard” or aggressive was important in determining status and so he found a way to be respected. He describes himself as a “scrapper”, or in other words, was “game for anything” and this included criminal activities. As well as “being up for a fight”, being a “scrapper” embodies recklessness which, in Matty’s case, included volunteering to steal from local shops and trying increasingly heavier drugs. Matty’s description of adopting a tough identity and engaging in violence indicated that this was not done to gain domination and control as described in theoretical accounts of hegemonic masculinity and violence (Connell, 2005; Messerschmidt, 2004). Instead, this identity position represented a bid for acceptance after a rejection from the social site of the school, and experiencing an absence and lack of nurture in the home. Matty was the youngest (not the most physically intimidating) but he was up for anything and would fight anyone. “That had purchase,” he remarks, and most importantly, this repeated gender performance gained him acceptance. As a response to exclusion from school, these repeated violent practices defined normalised and embodied masculine identities for many of the ‘impossible’ learners.

Jo Jo’s account of school corroborates that the hierarchy of age and body shape is more important than violence itself, both in school and in a Young Offender

Institution (YOI). Violence was not “the be all and end all” as some individuals simply did not need to fight if they had certain physical features:

Some guys don’t have to fight... so some were quite big for their age, maybe they’ve grown facial hair quicker, and maybe they don’t have to fight because of their strength or adult-like features. You know they are quite high up in the pecking order as they are either feared or respected.

Jo Jo felt that, in the construction of ‘hierarchies’, adult features mattered, and this was replicated in the YOIs. This account supports Gooch’s (2019) findings that acting older or appearing older was advantageous and contributed to a more convincing performance of hegemonic masculinity; conversely, being perceived as a “little boy” or immature could be risky and render an individual more vulnerable to bullying, a phenomenon called “boying off” (p. 86) in the YOI estate. As discussed previously, being perceived as vulnerable can lead to individuals being identified as outcasts, becoming subject to bullying; perceptions of age and physical appearance matter in the construction of accepted ‘hard’ masculine identities. Consistent with Youdell’s (2006) comments on bodies and bodily practices in school discourses, the impossible learners’ bodies and behaviours were not accepted in school discourses.

Participants’ experiences of the school site were characterised by inattention to teachers, play-fighting with friends and being subject to oversurveillance with some subsequently permanently excluded from school premises (see Chapter Six). A subset of participants found acceptance through adopting ‘hard’ or ‘tough man’ identities. Notably, these identities did not necessarily involve violence, especially if individuals were able to mould their bodies to convincing portrayals of hegemonic masculinities through appearance and size.

Stuart and Joel describe struggling to find a sense of belonging in the school space. Both describe violent practices that constituted ‘tough man’ subjectivities which were antithetical to school discourses. Joel quickly became the school bully and developed a reputation for “knocking people out.” Stuart on the other hand, struggled with anxiety and low confidence levels; he became upset when challenged by teachers. Stuart describes passing a few of his GCSEs; he describes never having succeeded at school and recalls that he did not thrive as a learner. Rather than an ‘impossible’ learner, Stuart was an ‘acceptable’ learner who did not do well and consequently gave up. Stuart’s disinvestment in formative schooling developed into a lackadaisical attitude towards education after he left school when was

technically enrolled in college. When I asked which course he did at college he answered: “A CTF course, £29.50 every Friday.” When I asked what that was, he replied with a wry smile, “Cunts ‘Til Friday.” This was a bricklaying course that he rarely attended as he was hungover from nights out drinking alcohol and smoking cannabis. He denigrated the educational opportunities that were open to him post-school, and he described himself (and peers) in misogynistic, Othering terms for spending his days back in a classroom. Stuart suggests he had a “face for trouble” and felt happier leading a hedonistic lifestyle fuelled by alcohol and drugs, getting into fights and being promiscuous. Stuart invoked discourses of ‘laddishness’, well-documented in studies researching young men’s behaviours in educational contexts (Francis, 2009; C. Jackson & Dempster, 2009; Willis, 1978), and positioned himself as a lothario and hedonist. Securing his place in the heterosexual matrix by being a serial monogamist but also promiscuous, Stuart went to lengths to present himself as both a ‘hardman’ and a ‘ladies’ man’ despite simultaneously presenting ambivalent attitudes towards (especially younger) women.

‘Ideal/acceptable’ learners who felt they belonged in the school space and experienced educational success were not, however, immune from violence on the street. Violent experiences shaped gender subjectivities in surprising ways and led to criminal trajectories. Reese’s narrative demonstrates how peer-related violence can lead to disinvestment from education. Reese describes his family as “second-generation immigrants from India” and his parents as practicing Sikhs who had high expectations for his education and future career. He tried hard at school and fitted in to the learning environment; he was liked by his teachers. In Year 11, just a few months before sitting his GCSEs, Reese was attacked by a gang in his local community in an inner-city neighbourhood:

Then what happened was [*pause*] two weeks before my exams, I got jumped by a load of Muslims. So, where I lived, there was a big Sikh/Muslim conflict going on. And, they broke my arm and I was in hospital so I missed my exams. So, err, all the local guys that were Sikh got together and basically, essentially, I was now involved in a gang. So instead of going home and revising these extra six months, I was sneaking out at night and hunting these guys down at nightclubs, and all these sorts of things.

He vividly describes how this moment led to him becoming embroiled in a world of violence and gangs, and through these experiences, he lost sight of his education. When he should have been “working his arse off” preparing for the retake

of his exams, he was instead surrounding himself “with guys that are from criminality and up for a fight.” This led him into a different world and his everyday practice went from attending school and revising for his exams, to partying, fighting and plotting revenge. It follows that in order to maintain dignity, Reese engaged in behaviours that were acceptable to his peers, as well as asserting a ‘hard’ masculine identity that supported self-defence. Reese’s learner identity underwent a radical shift; he transformed from being an engaged student who loved learning and was intent on achieving As at A Level to a young man learning how to protect himself from threat on the street. Reese recalled his teachers watching the transition with bitter disappointment. He recalls one teacher saying to him, “You’re going to regret this” – and he did; Reese finished his reflections from that time in his life, becoming disengaged with education as “my biggest ever mistake.” Reese comments that throughout his sentence other prisoners were surprised he was in for serious offences such as importation of drugs, as he seemed like one of the “educated ones”. Berggren and Gottzen (2023) suggest that gender norms “stick to bodies” (p. 5); how much did Reese’s former teenage life and ‘ideal’ learner identity stick to him? I suggest that the investment in tough masculinity was an adaptation to the masculine violent world he found himself in after the attack, and a way to avoid vulnerability in the future. Reese’s identity positions were not reconciled throughout the interview and his discourse, alternating between a commitment to education and a commitment to violence was evident throughout his narrative (see later sections).

Salih (2004) argues that, as Butler leaves “little room for belief in identity categories as stable, self-evident, or natural” (p. 6), it is useful to understand Reese’s story, and the stories of many of the men in this study, through this lens. There is nothing “natural” about the identity shifts and discursive practices Reese and others engaged in. He responded to being the victim of a violent attack by adopting hegemonic masculine signifiers of violence and aggression. Reese had a great deal of support at school after the incident but recalls not building upon this through college and instead letting his education slip away. He says:

I was fuckin’ about so much and being an idiot, in hindsight, I ended up with two Bs. And it was really disappointing, especially to my teachers and all that, because they knew what I was doing, I was going to school and sixth-form, with a baseball bat, [*laughs*], madness.

In sum, memories of school offered an opportunity for participants to discuss behaviours which inextricably connected to gendered performances often involving violent practices; for some, this was the beginning of a violent trajectory which led to YOIs and adult criminality. Few attempted to distance themselves from violent practices and indeed some stressed continuity of ‘tough man’ subjectivities into the present day, although these portrayals were not always convincing, which will be discussed in later sections. A theme identified across all ‘impossible learner’ narratives were feelings of alienation and isolation in the school space; adopting alternative ‘tough man’ identities and finding solace with peers who displayed similar violent and reckless behaviours appeared to be a means to find social acceptance, and often involved moulding bodies to fit accepted hegemonic masculine cultures. The following sections explore diverse dimensions of the ‘impossible’ learners’ masculine subjectivities, and how violent episodes feature in relational masculinities, and in relation to prison, and prison education.

Pathologising “Little Boys”: Relational Masculinities and Investments in Violent/Redemptive Discourses

Connell (2005) argues that masculinities are relational – dependent on the influence of men (and women) in a social space, performing hegemonic, complicit and subordinate roles. Kolluri (2023) further argues that “gender is a relational construct unfolding in dynamic and varied ways in real-time social exchanges” (p. 360). It was in descriptions of relations with younger men, often involving imagined violence in multiple sites including the prison, that inconsistencies in identity-construction manifested in the interviews. Younger men in prison spaces are often perceived as “wannabe gangsters” (Jewkes, 2005, p. 52). Jewkes argues that achieving power in prison spaces is often dependent on the relations with those in subordinate, excluded roles, and younger men can be vulnerable in their quest to achieve status or a reputation for ‘hardness’. Tough and ‘hardman’ identities troubled participants in relation to their perspectives on younger men and at times threats towards (or in some cases support for) subordinate younger men and caused tensions and contradictions within their narratives. The competing discursive frames centred on imagined supportive relations with younger men investing in redemption narratives (Maruna, 2001), which can be common for probationers recently released from prison. Investments in these narratives are part of desistance journeys and

probationers working out their next steps often want to “give back” to the community, especially to the next generation. Participants also invested in imagined violence against younger men, and expressed a sense of justified anger against them, shoring-up tough subjectivities and reinforcing violent practices. This section argues that conflicting relations with and attitudes towards younger men both destabilised and reified ‘hardman’ identities. This section also problematises my role, that of the researcher as a detached observer, and instead, I suggest my presence influenced investments in alternative discourses.

Connor, an ‘impossible learner’ recounted numerous stories about his friendships with famous local gangsters, and that in his ageing wisdom, he would no longer physically fight with younger men in jail or “roll around on the floor with them”, stating instead that he would “put holes in them.” In other words, he would shoot them with a gun, or stab them. Collier (1998) argues that through “weaponry, the male body is transformed” (p.119). He argues that the skilled use of weapons masculinises bodies and is a signifier of hypermasculine toughness (Collier, 1998). Connor’s violent practices helped him stay safe from bullies in his younger days as well as threats from others in the jail and on the street as an adult. The imagining of himself as a gangster appeared to go a step further and appeared to be part of a performance to establish a ‘tough man’ identity. I noted in my field diary that Connor, who mostly avoided eye contact with me in the interview looked at me directly while recounting these stories and other stories that seemed to bolster self-esteem. My inward reaction to these stories was one of surprise, especially imagined violence against younger men, but I tried not show this through facial expression or body language. However, my lack of enthusiasm in response to his stories seemed to have an effect. One minute after recounting stories about gangsters and violence, Connor changed his mind about young people and commented that he wanted to help younger men who are on pathways to crime to turn their lives around. I noted at the time of the interview: “A very quick change of heart! Is Connor struggling with letting go of his violent past? Is he gangster or guide? Liminal spaces may produce identity work where he is grappling with conflicting roles?”

It appeared Connor was also unsure of his future path. His ongoing investment in a tough and violent masculinity was important to him; whatever his future intentions were with regards to desistance and change, violence was never far from his thoughts. Violent behaviour manifested as a repeated action over time

throughout Connor's life, and, in the interview at least, similarly to other participants, violent responses to provocation or subordination appeared as the language of rationality. This narrative was interrupted (potentially) by my reaction, however minimal, and demonstrates that habitual practices over time 'stick' to identities (Beasley, 2015) and are hard to fully unstick. Youdell (2003) argues that subjects are both "enabled and constrained through discourse" (p. 6). Subjects can enact their agency to engage in identity negotiation, but this resistance or subversion is within the realms of the discourse that constitutes them. Connor is constrained by his criminal past and identity where violent practices became normalised and part of his identity as a 'tough man'/drug dealer rubbing shoulders with famous local gangsters. Another discourse available to him is the language of rehabilitation and desistance. Part of the journey to a crime-free life, according to desistance theorists, involves discourses of redemption and giving back, especially to youth/the next generation (Maruna, 2001). Youdell (2003) argues that subjectivities constituted through discourse are "deeply inscribed and exceed conscious choice or sovereign agency" (p. 9). Connor's struggle to identify as either 'gangster or guide' in the interview demonstrates the complexity of identity negotiation in constrained, limiting circumstances with reduced capabilities to move on from violent pasts.

Joel and Stuart, two further 'impossible learners' also expressed violent intent towards younger male peers, both motivated by imagined or perceived provocation and expressed as a 'retaliate first' mentality (Winlow & Hall, 2009). Stuart described Young Offenders (YOs) as "wannabe gangsters" and declared that he "hates them". He said: "Because I'm the one who gets done, when I hit them, because they've been giving it to me and I don't get no more chances anymore." Immediately, in the next sentence, he conceded that it could just be "the young'uns growing up", the same as he had once been, although he states that he did not "go around cocksure" of himself. Stuart often self-positions within contradictory discourses – frequently 'violent aggressor'/'innocent victim' – sometimes within the same sentence. For example, he reflects:

I'm not really a people person. Not because of me, but it's what I end up getting done because if someone is talking shit, I'm gonna fucking have 'em. And you know, I mean, but I'm not violent, but I will do it because I know what I've done by surprise to people and what people have done to me, I've been stabbed in the head and everything, I have. So, I get in there first kind of principle, right? But sometimes I would jump the gun. So that's why I want to keep away.

Stuart's disassociation from others stems from always "getting done" despite admitting to being violent if someone is "talking shit." In the next sentence he claims that he is not violent but will "get in there first" as he knows how violent men can be (referring to his own violent behaviours and being the victim of others' violence). He concluded by then admitting he has been too hasty in the past and "jumped the gun." Stuart is constituted and constrained through violent discourse and, similarly to Connor, seems unsure of his positioning as a 'tough', violent man in the space of the interview, despite bodily signifiers and many stories of violent episodes in his life. As I will discuss in the next section, Stuart was apparently interested in my opinion of him and my listener role may have had an impact on how he presented himself. On both days I interviewed him, he was due to meet his probation officer later the same day. I speculated in my field diary as to whether our interviews served as a type of preparation for these meetings.

Joel is the only Multi-Agency Public Protection Arrangements (MAPPA) probationer in the cohort. This status denotes that multiple agencies are working to reduce the risk of violent behaviours in the interest of the public good. Joel performed hegemonic masculinity, underpinned by violence; however, his relations with younger/more vulnerable men also offered further perspectives on the fragmented nature of his subjectivity and often disjointed narrative. In understanding Joel's story, I employ further theoretical lenses which are useful in interpreting Joel's relational masculinity. As discussed in Chapter Six, Joel's earliest memories were of his violent father and being subjected to routine acts of violence in the home. Joel learnt through repeated practices that to embody a normative version of masculinity, violence must play a central role. In most discussions with Joel, his prolific violence emerged as being present in almost every space of his adult life. Joel made numerous violent threats during his interviews, often directed at younger men and other vulnerable probationers. He suggested that younger men pretend to be "hard as nails" with their friends but are "little boys" on their own. He described a recent altercation with a younger man that lived in the Approved Premises (AP), stating that "it just sets me off. I hear his voice and I want to go to town on him." Joel cannot stand to witness others' vulnerability, especially younger men, and his only response is to be as violent as his own father was towards him. Joel showed me footage on his phone of another tenant in his AP, intoxicated and seemingly living in squalor. Joel was furious he had to share a wall with this man and made many threats to his

well-being, including that “some people have got stabbed for less.” I suggested to Joel that this individual could be vulnerable and in need of support. Joel nodded but then immediately redirected his anger at the agency running the AP for not dealing with tenants properly.

His pathologising of “little boys” or the vulnerable Other seems to reflect his view that vulnerability should be violently punished. According to theories grounded in psychosocial criminology, violent practices in adulthood are often a consequence of vulnerability in childhood. Subjects avoid feelings of vulnerability, suppress positioning which threatens a loss of power and violently project “supressed feelings onto the other” (Gadd & Jefferson, 2007, p. 45). This lens explains Joel’s violent behaviours and how they link to vulnerability and trauma in the past. Jefferson and Gadd’s psychosocial lens has been critiqued by some Masculinities scholars for ignoring the actions of violent men who do not have violent pasts or victim status from childhood, but who continue to perpetrate violence (Messerschmidt, 2005). Although a psychosocial lens is helpful in understanding Joel’s violent behaviours and helps explain his anger towards subordinate/vulnerable Others (arguably stemming from his traumatic childhood) it does not explain why he also decided later on in the interview that he also wanted to help younger men move away from crime. Similarly to Connor, he said he wanted to help them not to repeat the same mistakes he had made, but this was quickly followed by his impatience with those who would not listen to him.

Joel also invests in blame. Hearn (1998) argues that violent men often talk about their victimhood in early life to minimise their own actions and move away from taking responsibility for the harm they have caused. Joel blames his mother for his violent trajectory and suggests that if he “was mothered right” he would not have turned out the way he did. He also recalled his sister, whom he lived with after being excluded from the family home by his father, blaming her for his actions and “not telling [him], ‘no’.” A poststructuralist understanding of Joel’s subjectivity, constituted through violent discourse throughout his life, also suggests that he was trapped between competing frames and he also showed signs, however fleeting, that he wanted to change and understand his violent behaviours. As Joel is younger (29 years old), and the participant with the most extensive violent past, he is perhaps the most distant from redemption narratives and therefore offered the most convincing portrayal of tough masculinities in the interview. He failed to take responsibility or

show remorse for the violence perpetrated and seemed to be a great distance from desistance.

In sum, this section has discussed the performing and undermining of ‘tough men’ identities through an analysis of relations with younger men using multiple theoretical frames. The discussion has revealed that violent practices in the past rippled into the present-day interviews with participants navigating competing discourses including toughness, redemption and victimhood. As the participants are on probation, desistance discourses may be more practiced as interviewees were meeting regularly with probation officers and engaging in other types of rehabilitative support. Problematising my role as the researcher in the interview, participant attitudes towards younger men may have been influenced by researcher reactions (however minimal) and positioning, and could have triggered attempts to reduce the impact of their violent narratives.

Prison Masculinities and the Excluded Other: The Multiple Functions of Violence in Prison

“Face it Like a Man”

This section brings together participant experiences and perspectives on everyday prison violence, and how practices specific to the carceral space served different functions and held different meanings. Scholarship surrounding ‘prison masculinities’ is a growing field which endeavours to explore and understand the embodied practices of idealised, complicit and subordinate roles that men emulate in the carceral space with many studies focussing on hypermasculinity and violent practices (Bengtsson, 2016; Newburn & Stanko, 1994; Sabo et al., 2001). The following discussion is anchored in how violent practices influenced participants’ subjectivities and identity negotiations in the site of the interview, and how feelings of belonging, fear and vulnerability manifested in conversations around prison violence. As this section will illustrate, participants often positioned themselves in opposition to the excluded Other, reinforcing a positionality which is distanced from vulnerability, proving their place in the prison masculine hierarchy.

As highlighted previously, I asked all participants if they had witnessed violence in prison. This question relates in part to the sociopolitical context of the dramatic increase in violence in English prisons in recent years (MoJ, 2020, detailed

in Chapters Two and Three), with some commentators linking this increase to efficiency cuts in frontline staffing by the Conservative-Liberal Democrat Coalition government, beginning in 2010 (Ismail, 2020). Recent studies have suggested that a reduction in frontline staff has exacerbated a “normative culture based on latent violence” (Gooch & Treadwell, 2023, p. 1221) and the “legitimation of prisoner authority” (p. 1221) which has arisen in the absence of trained staff, further compromising prisoner safety. All participants confirmed the prevalence of prison violence during their custodial sentences and positioned themselves diversely in relation to what they had witnessed, or taken part in. Participants demonstrating compliance with prison authority discourses described breaking up fights and being trusted by prison staff to contend unruly, violent prisoners. Invoking discourses of trust, rationality and authority, these experiences suggested they were in control of the situation as well as subscribing to ‘protector/hero’ discourses. Conversely, other participants described witnessing violent events and offered commentary on why the victim had been targeted. Martin, for example, describes witnessing a “kiddy being thrown down a flight of stairs.” He suggests the young man was a victim due to unpaid debt and follows this assumption with his personal mantra of looking after oneself and not getting into debt in prison. Participants distanced themselves from the victims of violence in prison and remarked upon how their own behaviours differed from those in subordinate roles, including younger men in the prison, like the “kiddy” described by Martin. Whether breaking up fights or witnessing violence, this positioning distanced participants from both the victims and the aggressors in their stories, and further supported their investments in discourses on masculine markers such as self-sufficiency and being a ‘protector/hero’.

This distancing and alternative positioning was also evident in participants’ responses to the question: “Who are most at risk of becoming victims of violence in prison?” Participants generally argued that those who were somehow different from the norm or, worse, had violated the ‘prison code’ (Sabo et al., 2001) were the most at risk of becoming victims of violence. Violating the ‘prison code’ could mean informing on others’ crimes, being a sex offender or not paying back debts. The “debtheads”, Connor argued, would “run away” to the Vulnerable Persons Unit (VPU), espousing the belief that they should “face it like a man, take it on the chin” if they owed (drug) money to someone higher up the pecking-order. Connor’s remark captures how prisoners’ responses to threats of violence are directly linked to

warding off vulnerability by investing into a 'tough man' discourse – “face it like a man.” The fear of being perceived as vulnerable, as discussed in the Chapter Seven, is at the forefront of prisoners' minds. The fear of being perceived as weak, a loner or being accused of the ultimate breaches of the 'prison code' – being an informant or harming children, especially sexually – led participants in this study to go to great lengths to prove that their heteronormative identities were stable. Reese, for example, describes how he “battered” a sex offender after a tip-off from a prison officer. He describes the episode as a collective violent practice “that goes on every day in prisons” and the men on the wing taking a stand against child abusers. Engaging in violent practices was the ultimate demonstration of Reese distancing himself from the vulnerable Other, and being part of the “battering” publicly displayed his upholding of the 'prison code' of not hurting children. As Murray (2020) asserts, visibility is a key factor in displaying masculine credentials, especially to “the key audience that matters to them” (p. 5). In this example, violence functioned as a practice that distanced the aggressors from the excluded Other and secured their place in the hierarchy, emphatically distinguishing themselves from the most pathologised Other in the prison – the sex offender.

Participants also discussed how violence on the street changed upon entering prison and 'hard' identities became a “tough line to walk”. Matty describes, for example, the decision to engage in violence in prison as a balancing act. He was involved in collecting debts and he describes how the prison economy runs on debt collection. He remarked that “you can't be in that space if you're not willing to use violence” but also elaborated that being “game for anything”, like in his younger days, was no longer an option. He explains:

The real fucking hard people would be like, 'Who does this guy think he is?' and so I make myself a target but not enough so that the people who I thought were lower would understand not to fuck with me. Yeah, I mean, so it's a balance.

The masculine hierarchy in prison in this example is based around violent capabilities. Knowing one's strength and its implications in terms of one's place in the hierarchy is important, as is not appearing too confident. He described that he “would have to fight” if he was publicly challenged, as this is important in determining status, but in terms of his job of debt collection, it would be like “rolling the dice” as he would not know how he would “fare up” against others. Matty explained that there “has to

be violence” at times, but “on the inside” he was very “reluctant.” He avoids talking specifically about fear, explaining the balance in terms of it being a gamble as the other person could turn out to be ‘harder’ than him. Matty’s narrative and insights on violence allude to the front management strategies explained by de Viggiani (2003) and Jewkes (2005), where a certain amount of “controlled aggression” (Crewe et al., 2014, p. 86) is needed to negotiate and navigate the precarious spaces of prison life. Jewkes (2005) argues that the tough masculine exterior hides deeper vulnerabilities, or in the case of some of the participants like Matty, his young age and “striking vulnerability” (Gooch, 2019, p. 80) in the context of adult male prison.

Maguire (2019) suggests that young men who have spent their formative years on the street, constructing their masculine identity in the face of some of the most challenging material and structural deprivation, adapt to prison life relatively easily. Matty is from one of the most deprived towns in England. He grew up with street violence and experienced household hardship. When I asked him about his first night in prison and how he felt about it, he said simply, “I was raring to go.” As Maguire explains:

being able to adapt easily to the familiar carceral space is not to challenge the research that has shown prison environments to be brutally violent, psychologically harmful and derivational in nature. Rather it is to suggest that they were able to quickly adapt to the deprivation ... because these experiences – to a large extent – paralleled their earlier lives. (p. 149)

Matty’s violent behaviours were constructed from feelings of alienation in every social site apart from the street, where an investment in hard masculinity was needed to belong and negotiate social power amongst peers effectively (Parkes & Conolly, 2013). Matty, like other participants, felt he belonged in the prison world and was able to use violence as a resource to carry out his job as debt collector and maintain his reputation and social status despite again, not being the ‘hardest’ man on the block.

Prisoners’ narratives demonstrated that violence is omnipresent in prisons, corroborating the research discussed in Chapter Three. Participants often described themselves in bystander/witness roles and offered commentary on why certain men in prison become victims of violence, taking care to position their values and practices in opposition to the victims’ behaviour. I suggest that this served to distance

the participants from the excluded Other, who often embodies vulnerability and can become a target to bullies. Being vulnerable, is a risky business in prison.

Participants who were compliant with prison rules and had good relations with prison officers positioned themselves as ‘heroes/protectors’, willing to risk their own safety to break up fights and calm unruly peers. Again, this served to distance participants from violent behaviours, often antithetical to rational discourses, but also allowed them to share their experiences of violence, without (explicitly) identifying as a victim or aggressor. Some participants described a “balancing act” or “tough line to walk” in reference to using violence as a resource. Knowing one’s place in the hierarchy emerged as important to ensuring an individual’s safety, especially in upholding status and reputation, often manifesting differently to fighting capabilities on the street. Prison violence served multiple functions and participants invested in diverse discourses to make sense of their experiences.

“You Can’t Show Vulnerability in Prison”: Prison Education and Navigating Vulnerability

As discussed in Chapter Three, engagement with education can reduce prison violence (McGuire, 2018), and can foster a more prosocial masculine identity (Sloan, 2016). Nichols (2021) argues that although there is evidence of men in prison engaging in prison education and moving away from violence, questions remain on the need for a performance of hegemonic masculinity in other spaces of the prison. This section moves away from the ‘impossible learners’ who avoided education, and engages with the themes of vulnerability, violence and educational engagement by analysing the experiences of Freddie, a middle-class Black man who is imprisoned for a ‘white collar’ crime. Freddie’s strategy to navigate the violent spaces of prison was to immerse himself in prison education. Freddie was a gifted and talented learner at school and an enthusiastic student in the prison education department. However, he felt vulnerable on the wings and found engaging with prison education a way to avoid the violence and the “hussle” of the wings.

Throughout both of Freddie’s interviews, it was clear that he had “made good” of his prison experience. He describes prison education as his “saviour” throughout his time in prison. After his first night in prison, which was “horrible” mostly due to guilt of how his family would cope with finding out about his sentence, he found himself quickly adapting and strategising about his time in prison: “I thought to

myself. Keep your head down get into education as soon as you can.” Freddie wanted to get away from the wings as soon as possible: “If I’m not there, no one can have a problem with me” Freddie found the landings a place of trouble and violence, where one has to “walk a tough line.” Freddie had never engaged in violence in his life, and wanted to hold on to his Christian values in prison, to be authentic and stay away from trouble. He strived to do this by engaging in prison education.

AM: Okay. So, would you say it was a bit of a lifeline?

Freddie: No, it wasn't a bit. It was literally the saviour of my time in prison. Prison education changed it completely. Without it, it would have been depressing. I don't even know how I would have got through it. Honestly.

After serving nine months of his 18-month sentence, Freddie was released two months before the first COVID-19 lockdown. Freddie commented on his relief that he was not in prison during lockdown as he would have been prevented from going to the education department. Prison education was inspiring and he found that he pushed himself to try new subjects and was challenged in different ways. Although Freddie recounted a positive experience of prison education, it did not however immunise him from vulnerability to violence on the wings. Freddie remarked that he had never been involved in violence, yet an incident with his “pad-mate” led him to planning a violent attack against him, although he never followed it through. Freddie’s pad-mate was serving time for a violent crime. He was addicted to Spice (an illegal psychoactive drug) and Freddie recognised early that he was “one of those people who prison is not helping him and he’s using it for drugs.” Freddie felt sorry for him, so when his pad-mate asked for some money to buy food from the canteen, he agreed on the provision that the following week he would be paid back. When he asked for his money back the following week, his pad-mate threatened to stab him. “With a plastic knife” Freddie said, “but it’s still going to hurt.”

Freddie became plagued with thoughts of how this would look to the rest of the wing, and he felt vulnerable about the hearsay that would arise from this altercation. Freddie ruminated and imagined what his pad-mate might say: “And he tells the whole wing that, you know, I owed him money, so he says, ‘and all I had to do was like threaten to stab him’ and he just said, ‘Okay, fine. Keep the money.’” Freddie adopts a ‘retaliate first’ (Winlow & Hall, 2009) mentality and plans to “kettle” his pad-mate. “Kettling” is prison vocabulary for pouring boiling hot water on another

person, a brutal but not infrequent form of violence in prisons. He boils the kettle twice, but eventually decides against it and reasons that, after threatening to stab him, his pad-mate promptly fell asleep, so he could not have been serious. The following is an extract from our conversation:

Freddie: You can't show vulnerability in prison... You're not operating how you would on the outside, because everything is different. And in order to survive, you have to do certain things or act in certain ways to get you through. It's a tough line to walk.

AM: So, were you trying to project an image?

Freddie: No, no. I was going to kettle him! I boiled the water and everything!

Hall and Winlow (2010) suggest that the rumination and subsequent plans for punishment is part of a subject's "culturally informed self-image. From his standpoint he cannot allow slights or insults to go unpunished. He appears to be expressing the fear that if these components cannot be retained the 'self' in its present form is lost" (p. 296).

This insight is helpful in understanding my exchange with Freddie. Freddie was clearly worried about how gossip would spread, and that he would be perceived as weak and vulnerable. As already discussed throughout this thesis, being perceived as weak or vulnerable signals danger to one's personal security, and a projection of a tough masculinity is used as a strategy to stay safe, or at least remain unnoticed. Freddie felt that he needed to take drastic action to show he was not a pushover. He imagined the conversations about him and this rumination led to him boiling the kettle to attack his pad-mate. This action is bound up with Freddie's sense of self and positionality, potentially as a middle-class Black man who is navigating violent prison spaces for the first time. Hall and Winlow (2010) suggest it is the response to the threat that is of importance, not the violence itself. When I suggested to Freddie that he was projecting an image, he emphatically denied this and said he was authentic in his (intended) actions. He went on to remark that he was vocal about how his pad-mate had violated him, and everyone knew he was angry. He made it clear that he was not "a walkover" but at the same time, ultimately, he did not resort to violence and therefore did not "violate" his own principles. It was important for Freddie to reconcile his sense of self in the description of this episode and present a unified identity that was consistent with his narrative up until that point. He

managed to assert a tough masculinity in order to ward off any hearsay that he was vulnerable, but also did not actually commit any violence, so kept his authentic self-intact. Freddie argued that “prison pushes you to behave in certain ways.”

Freddie’s experiences build on Crewe and colleagues’ (2014) insights on the prison being an emotionally diverse space. The wings are hypermasculine and, as Nichols (2021) argues, prison learners may have to perform hegemonic violent masculinities in order to stay safe, whilst simultaneously wearing an alternative mask in the classroom. Freddie’s time in the prison classroom could not protect him from the tough and violent behaviours and values of the wing. He describes planning a brutal crime against his pad-mate as “survival” and it is in Freddie’s story that the criminogenic nature of imprisonment is evident. Having been imprisoned for fraud after living a peaceful, violence-free life, if Freddie had gone ahead with this brutal act, he could have been convicted for violent assault which would have resulted in an extended sentence and had serious repercussions in his future (as well as serious consequences for his pad mate). The emotional currency of prison is vulnerability and Freddie’s story contributes to the literature which describes how the hypermasculine spaces of prison can engender further violence and crime, even from those who have never committed a violent crime in their life before entering prison.

“Things are Falling Apart”: Moments of Trouble, Sticky Masculinities and Impossible Bodies

Some participants identified as ‘impossible learners’, and, as discussed, they often found that their bodies ‘fitted’ in the culture and context of the street, or prison, including through violence; conversely, they felt like outsiders in the world of education and learning. Returning to Youdell’s (2006) ‘impossible bodies and subjectivities being incommensurate with certain discourses, participants’ bodies moulded to fit the worlds they thrived in. Drawing upon Berggren’s (2014) theoretical ideas on ‘sticky masculinities’, this section develops a further theoretical understanding of how masculine signifiers – such as ‘hardness’ and violent practices – ‘stuck’ to participants’ bodies to shape masculine subjectivities and performances. As this section will explore, when idealised cultural frames were no longer easily emulated due to mental and physical vulnerabilities, a tension is created in participants’ narratives as they struggle with identity work and rationalising their

place in the world. As the participants who talked the most about violent experience, as aggressors and victims, this section analyses Stuart's and Joel's narratives. Joel argues that he is less comfortable in the community than in prison, where his "face fitted." Stuart also suggested several times that he had a "face for trouble" as he was "always getting into fights". In order to maintain a sense of belonging and membership in these violent worlds, bodies needed to repeatedly emulate a tough masculinity. However, narratives became incoherent and identities were challenged at the point where vulnerabilities became clear through participants' reflections on their insecurities, especially around the discourse of age. My analysis focuses on how participants reflected on their physical and mental vulnerabilities alongside violent narratives, and how this impacted the shaping of their gender subjectivities.

Berggren (2014) explores how poststructuralist ideas which focus on how subjects are "positioned by various intersecting and conflicting cultural norms" (p. 244) meet with phenomenological framings which emphasise the role of bodies and lived experience (Ahmed, 2006). This theoretical view can support a deeper understanding of masculine subjectivity. The coalescing of theoretical frames can create an understanding of a conflicting subject that is inclusive of the physical body, the discursive and the emotional. As Berggren suggests:

Bodies culturally read as men are oriented toward the culturally established signs of 'masculinity' such as hardness and violence. The repeated sticking together of certain bodies and signs in this way is what creates masculine subjectivity. This is always a contested, variable, and uncertain process, but one in which the repeated enactment of masculinity tends to be sticky and naturalised. (p. 245)

This section argues that the signifiers attached to tough men's and 'impossible' learners' bodies became unstuck or less sticky through the discourse of age. While some of the men in this study repeatedly drew on violent masculine tropes, I noticed that two of the men who did this revealed 'cracks' that seemed to be related to their age. In analysing these cases, I drew on writers who argue that:

the body is central to a man's understanding and practice of masculinity ... [where] ... cultural ideas of manhood shape men's body image or their body-related perceptions, experiences and feelings... [all of which are] ... underpinned by age relations or the use of age as an organising principle. (Hurd & Mahal, 2021, p. 229)

Earle (2018) argues that the “masculine body projects” (p. 52) of young men in can tell us about the ideological landscape that they are operating in. Working class men define themselves through their bodies because of the “ways in which social and economic marginality has otherwise reduced their capacity to shape their environment or futures”.(p. 52). For older men, Calastanti and Tech (2007) further argue that ageist tropes centring on discourses of frailty and decline contribute to stigmatisation and exclusion of older people, and intersects with a subject’s class, race and gender. Hurd and Mahal (2021) argue that middle-class men often have access to more resources and consequently live more privileged and healthier lifestyles compared to men in working-class locations.

Stuart is 48 years old. As I discuss in Chapter Six, Stuart grew up in a low-income household and, after extended stays in prison from adolescence, he now exists on the margins of society. Combined with his ex-offender status and reliance upon state benefits due to being declared unfit for work, Stuart’s ageing body was a source of distress and an area he returned to repeatedly during his interviews. He has a large build, greying hair, fading tattoos on his arms and numerous scars on his body, including on his face. At the beginning of the interview, before he had sat down or even introduced himself, Stuart recounted the story of how he had acquired a large three-inch scar across his face. He referred to it many times in both interviews and was concerned about it. He lamented, “Now I’ve got to suffer with that on my face.” Gambetta (2009) suggests that scars work as a type of prison trade craft, and “testify to past fighting ‘achievements’” (p. 85). Stuart did not regard his scar in this way and instead was concerned that this lasting bodily signifier of past violence made him less attractive. He decided against growing a beard to hide it as he would look like a “tramp”.

His appearance and body seemed integral to his self-perceived attractiveness and self-esteem, and now that it was failing him, he appeared deeply troubled by it and his place in the world. Stuart makes it clear that his body was a source of pride in his younger days, both in terms of his attractiveness to women, being physically strong as a labourer and having good fighting capabilities. He embodied heteronormative practices and engaged in discourses of promiscuity in recounting his relationships with (mostly younger) women. However, his present-day physical and mental health troubled him and questions of whether his body was still accepted in a world of violence, toughness and sexual attractiveness lingered unanswered

through his narrative. The signifiers that stuck firmly to his body in his youth and shaped his masculine subjectivity – his blonde hair, strong body (needed for drug and alcohol taking, manual labour and fighting), scars and tattoos – were transformed and challenged by age.

Stuart's interview was dominated by discourses of failure, ageism, justified violent retaliation and victimhood. There was little sign of hope or redemption in his narrative. The gendered discursive practices that have framed his life as a man – heteronormative sexuality, violent practices and his work with his hands as decorator – appeared to be crumbling. Stuart is in receipt of Personal Independence Payment (PIP) and has many ailments related to decades of violence and excess; he is anxious and agoraphobic and is unable to exercise as he gets out of breath. He admitted that he no longer ventures into the centre of the city where he resides as he worries that he will be attacked. Although he spent much of the interview recounting his violent crimes in detail, he was painfully insecure about his many health issues and anxieties. At the beginning of the interview, completely unprompted, Stuart commented, "Things are falling apart". He framed himself within discourses of ageing "I'm going grey... I used to be blonde"; bodily dysfunction, "Nothing works down there"; and a lack of belonging or hope for a future romantic relationship, "I'm not bothered by friends. I'm not bothered by women to tell you the truth." Moreover, his candid outpouring over his insecurities and fears about his failing body and mind undermined his investment in toughness and revealed instead a vulnerable man who feared for his future and his ageing body and mind. Gadd (2003) argues:

Men's bodies are sources of insecurity and feelings of inadequacy, symbolic purveyors of competence and incompetence, sites through which intimacy is experienced or thwarted, and instruments through which difficult emotions are communicated, concealed, and contained. (p. 350)

The scar on his cheek seemed a permanent cultural inscription of his violent past and the 'tough man' discourse he often invoked in the interview; but this scar troubled him and appears symbolic of the contentious relationship he had with the consequences of his own violent actions. Positive signifiers of masculinity became irreversibly unstuck.

As noted in the methodology chapter (Chapter Five), Stuart seemed interested in my opinion about his body and appearance. My positionality as a (relatively) young female researcher caused tension. In our second interview he

asked me if I could tell he had been working out since the last interview (one month previously). Stuart asked for a kiss and then a hug at the end of both interviews. I deliberated in my field diary around whether my positionality influenced his candidness about his bodily and mental insecurities: "Would Stuart open up to a male interviewer in the same way?" Further, I noted in my diary near the beginning of the first interview whether Stuart felt he could drop the "mask" of tough masculinity with me, though this reflection was soon undermined by his insistence on retelling long violent episodes where he positioned himself as the justified (albeit wounded) aggressor. Stuart's narrative revealed unstable identity framings throughout the interviews; he clung on to past violent and hegemonic masculine status, yet was also painfully aware that his body and mind were deteriorating. In the interview space, Stuart solicited compliments and reassurance from me, and of course his needs could not be met (discussed in Chapter Five). This further contributed to the tension and struggle in the interview space where the retelling of violent events and their bodily/physical consequences caused insecurity for Stuart.

As noted previously, Joel was also extremely candid about his violent practices and his many struggles with his mental health. Although Joel has never been formally diagnosed, he suspects he has bipolar disorder (BD) and ADHD and has never received treatment. He has had breakdowns and has received support in a secure psychiatric unit; in prison, Joel spent time in isolation for his violent behaviours. By sharing his experiences of violence in multiple locations including at work, in the home, on the street, and in prison as well as in public and communal spaces, he appears to use violence as a resource to negotiate and solve any type of interpersonal conflict he has encountered in his adult life. Joel has been on a clear violent trajectory since childhood and speaks of violence as an embodied, routine practice in adulthood; his main asset in maintaining and performing violent hegemony is his youth and young body. His self-esteem seemed tied to his reputation for violence and how he is notorious in his area for being "hard". McAra and McVie (2010) reveal an (unexpected) finding in their longitudinal study on violence; that self-esteem increased with involvement in violence in poverty settings. Joel's violence is an inherent part of his masculine identity, and having a violent reputation keeps him safe. Violence is significant as a resource that increases his self-esteem and keeps his own mental vulnerability at bay. Joel positions himself as dominant and violent in the interview. However, his candidness about his failing

mental health, seemingly stemming from his vulnerability as a child, renders him out of control in multiple social situations in the present day. I wondered at the end of our two interviews together what the future might hold for Joel. In many ways, his life paralleled Stuart's and I questioned what may happen to Joel's confidence as he ages. Will his tough masculinity also be undermined by a failing, 'impossible' body? Although he gave the most convincing portrayal of hegemonic masculinity, his mental vulnerability was evident and a contributory factor to his incompatibility with functioning in 'prosocial' contexts.

In sum, bodies are inherently tied to both hegemonic and vulnerable masculine statuses. 'Sticky' masculine signifiers which shape tough masculinities in youth, can become unstuck by the unstoppable discourse of age and temporality. Stuart's memories of his younger, stronger, more violent and more attractive body haunted him and this manifested awkwardly in the interview space. Participants who are struggling with physical health may lose confidence in themselves and no longer convincingly present a coherent narrative of hegemonic, tough masculinity. This dynamic emphasises the importance of how bodies are moulded by cultural hegemonic scripts that dictate the shaping of gender performances and subjectivities. Enhanced self-esteem is connected to strong fighting capabilities and the cultural bodily signifiers of strength and appearance are intrinsic to a convincing performance. These physical assets and characteristics are time-bound, however, and Chapter Nine discusses the remaining questions regarding how this ever-changing and contestable masculine status affects education and desistance journeys, exclusion and belonging.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have explored the diverse functions of violence in prison leavers' lives and how, for some, violent incidents deeply impacted their educational engagement and the shaping of their fledgling subjectivities. I have mapped how tough identities are shaped in the spaces of school, the home and on the street, and how they often develop as the school space becomes alien, hostile and exclusionary. Crime trajectories become inevitable for some 'impossible' learners, though 'ideal/acceptable' learners were also not immune from violence on the street. I chart the role of violence in participants' relations with others, and how discussion around imagined violence directed towards younger men can reveal 'sticky' masculine

identity positions. Some who invested in discourses on rehabilitation and described their desire to support younger people, also talked about a desire to harm them, often within the space of a few minutes. I argue that this demonstrates the complexity of identity negotiation, and that masculine signifiers such as violence are not easily modified or replaced through an individual's reshaping of gender subjectivities. The space of prison, and prison education specifically, revealed further complexities surrounding how participants related to their peers, with many distancing themselves from the vulnerable, excluded Other, who was the most likely to be the victim of violence. Recollections from prison also revealed how middle-class men used education as a strategy to move away from prison violence. This strategy, however, did not always work for them, as negotiations with violent peers appeared to be a consistent feature of life on the wings. This chapter closed with a candid account of my interactions with a participant who experienced a violent past, and was grappling with his identity in the present day. Masculine signifiers which were once a source of pride – strong body, fighting capabilities, good looks – had eroded over time and his present-day anxieties over his appearance and declining body and mind, manifested awkwardly in the interview. I have analysed these interactions to further evidence the difficulties inherent in shaping and reshaping one's gender subjectivity, and how violence features in these complex processes and deliberations.

Chapter Nine: Education, Desistance and Gender Subjectivity Post-Prison

Introduction

When you talk about pathways of crime, you step on a certain pathway and you can go off-route, and then you get into trouble. But then you can also step on another pathway and 'right yourself'. You could kind of, you know, you can build up that kind of self-pride that you recklessly kind of traded whilst offending. Um, and you know, I could, I can [pause] look in the shaving mirror again now, whereas for a number of years, I was so ashamed of what I had done.

Joe, on a discussion on his PhD post-prison

I've just been to probation and they're telling me 'Oh you're going to end up back in prison' and I was saying that, um, obviously the people that I'm around at the minute, the bike... the lads that go out on bikes, I mean and stuff like that, they're not the best people to be around, you know.

Joel, on a discussion on his current peer group post-prison

This chapter discusses the intersection between desistance and persistence journeys, educational (dis)engagement post-release and the continued reshaping of the gendered and learner subjectivities of participants. Joe, in the first quote, discusses the powerful role of education in his desistance journey – “righting himself” – and how his trajectory through higher education, first completing a Masters in Criminology and then a PhD examining the type of crime he committed, supported his own personal development and moving on to a place of acceptance. Joe is married with six children and he talked with me via Zoom from his family home. Joel, in the second quote, discusses his present living conditions in an AP, where the interview takes place, and his ways of coping with his complex mental health issues and difficulties with co-boarders who also have complex problems, by speeding on his motorbike and spending time with “the wrong people” and therefore being more likely to commit an offence. These quotes highlight the radically different points participants in this study occupied on their desistance journeys, and this chapter will analyse the role of educational dis/re-engagement and the reshaping or entrenchment of gender subjectivity in this process.

Participants' disparate positioning at different stages of desistance was partly influenced by when they had been released from prison following their most recent

offence. Those who had not reoffended for over 10 years were more established in their careers and non-offender identities, and therefore, the success of the desistance process was more evident. Some participants, on the other hand, had only recently been released from prison and were living in hostels and APs while they were integrating back into the community. For these groups, the 'pains of desistance' (Nugent, & Schinkel, 2016), especially in terms of material deprivation and ongoing isolation were clear. Others had been on their desistance journeys for over a year and were living independently, or with family. As discussed in Chapter Two, desistance is a process, not an event (Maruna, 2001) and although many showed signs of moving forward, others seem to be struggling with change due to complex barriers connected with well-established gendered practices. Questions of desistance arose throughout the interviews and some described their 'hooks for change' (Giordano et al., 2002) openly and began their narrative with what had helped them move forward, including their re-engagement or continuing engagement with education post-prison. Others were more reluctant to talk about change and struggled to formulate their aspirations for the future, even what lay ahead of them for the next few months. In response to the question, "What are your future plans?" most participants expressed wishes which respond to heteronormative frameworks and values including employment, marriage and fatherhood.

This chapter begins with a discussion on the participants perspectives on material disadvantage, and how secure accommodation, supportive relationships and financial support made a difference in mapping their futures post-prison, especially in the first few months. Following this, I discuss how some participants described investing in their children's education and how this served multiple functions including supporting transformative heteronormative identities. I move onto discuss how some participants engaged in HE during and post-prison, and this journey served to develop intellectual identities and offer introspection on their childhoods and entries into crime. Finally, I discuss the 'impossible learners' who appear stuck in destructive gendered trajectories post-prison, including performing both violent and subordinate masculinities.

"The Bank of Mum": Material (Dis)Advantage and Freedom to Learn

This section discusses how the participants experienced different levels of comfort and support after leaving prison and engaged with education and work

opportunities diversely as a consequence. Some struggled in APs and had very little funds to secure future educational opportunities, whereas others returned to the family home and had a lot of support to reestablish themselves. The support and opportunity a person has when leaving prison is fundamental to their desistance from crime post-prison (Giordano et al., 2002; McNeill, 2016). Harry told me about the many learning opportunities he had post-release from prison. He was in the process of finishing a paper on military history for a publisher and he was considering doing editing courses as well as learning about being a carer for his elderly mother. Harry described the idyllic family home that he lives in with his mother, nestled in the countryside, and comments on his good fortune of transitioning to this level of comfort post-release from prison:

I didn't have to go to a hostel. I was very fortunate, you know came straight home. A lot of guys, I mean some of them, probably would have ended up on the streets. God knows what's happened to them since then [*long pause*].

Harry later quips that he is living on the “Bank of Mum”, but is aware that living in comfort, stability and security post-release from prison is a fortunate state many who leave prison do not have access to. As well as his positive experience of education in prison (detailed in Chapter Seven), it was this level of comfort that had allowed him to easily re-engage with his education upon release.

Eight of the participants at the time of interview were living in an AP following their release from prison. APs provide accommodation for people re-entering the community after prison as well as others those who are socially, psychologically or physically vulnerable. Many described the difficulties of living with other people who were also leaving prison. Martin comments that most of the people in his AP were sent back to prison after breaking parole restrictions, largely due to unresolved issues connected to addiction. Martin felt that their vulnerability and lack of support was connected to their gender as he feels women are better supported after prison. He explains:

“I live in a dry house at the minute, and three people got kicked out because they relapsed, but because one of them is a woman, and she’s vulnerable on the street, so they put her up in a hotel room, and these two lads. They’re on the street.”

Women can be extremely vulnerable leaving prison, with many experiencing a range of issues connected to mental health, homelessness and alcohol and drug

addiction (Prison Reform Trust, 2025). On the street, however, Martin suggests that women's vulnerability is better recognised. Martin explains that violence is part of the life for a young man on the street. However, he claims that there is very little support because men are not deemed vulnerable. As described in previous chapters, Martin has a better understanding of his drug addiction after receiving the results of a psychological evaluation. He found out that he has ADHD, and had been using cocaine to cope with the symptoms since adolescence. He struggled with symptoms during his schooling and became increasingly excluded from the mainstream student population. At the time of the interview, Martin was in recovery from addiction and trying hard to make his business plan work. Inspired by an entrepreneur who visited his secure unit, he was hoping to get a job in construction in order to save for a specialist plastering course, which would enable him to tailor his business to high-end clients. However, he needed to raise £1,000 for this course, and was troubled by how he is going to do it. Martin would have been homeless without the AP and had few resources to establish himself post-prison. Although he had ambition to succeed as a businessman, he didn't have the financial capital to realise this dream in the short term. The material disadvantage and lack of support he experienced created extra barriers to navigate.

Brett had worked for an ex-offender organisation for many years at the time of interview, and reflected back on the early days after being released from his last sentence. He recalled that his partner gave him space to find out what he wanted to do after prison. He looked after their son while she worked, and was able to reflect on his future rather than rushing into employment. Prison education is based on a vocational model that encourages prison leavers into blue collar work on release. Brett refused to work in low paid manual labour jobs, and instead found a different path to more fulfilling work. He spent time pursuing more creative forms of education in prison, specifically art which supported his mental health recovery, and he pursued this on release from prison. After helping a friend deliver puppetry workshops in schools, Brett began working for a prominent ex-offender organisation in a peer mentor role. He found art and working with people more rewarding than manual labour. He is now a senior manager who runs projects and continues to work one-to-one with prison leavers and supports their well-being. He continues to pursue art outside of work. He knew he did not want to go back to manual labour and decided instead to do something different with his life. Brett describes this time after prison in

terms of his partner giving him the “freedom to grow”; he was afforded the autonomy to develop capabilities in his own time. Rather than helping to pay bills by working in warehouses and other manual labour jobs as he had done in the past, having this time and space, he felt, gave him the choice to build a different future.

A number of participants, like Joe, re-engaged with education during prison and post-release by enrolling into university and joining the HE community. As suggested by Jones and Jones (2021) this is not a straightforward process for prison leavers and the struggles associated with this trajectory are documented later on in this chapter. However, all of those who were successfully engaging with HE had the support of family (in most cases a heterosexual partner), a stable home and income (however modest) and mostly also had children to support and nurture. Those who appeared to be struggling post-release did not have this stability; they were living in APs, estranged from family and seemed very much alone in the world apart from the staff supporting them and the other prison leavers who were in a similar position, and were experiencing ongoing problems. As many are unable to work due to physical and mental health difficulties, they found their days boring and began to feel frustrated with the other boarders within the APs. Connor, who is in the process of recovery after years of drug abuse, ended his interview with a saying that his mother used to recite: “The devil finds work for idle hands.” Without dealing drugs he was bored, yet living on Universal Credit (UC) was difficult and there were many barriers to “going straight.”

Fulfilling heteronormative roles such as cohabitation with heterosexual partner or children, employment and fatherhood increased prison leavers’ chances of engaging with education post-release. Without stability, support and comfort, it was much harder for prison leavers to engage with wider society and ultimately develop educational capabilities. These difficulties further exacerbated their exclusion, as will be discussed in the final section of this chapter.

“Family Guy”: Investing in Children’s Education, Disrupting the STPP and Performing Heteronormative Masculine Subjectivity

Carlsson (2013) argues that “being a good, protective father” (p. 680) is an important aspect of many desisters’ masculinity project post-prison. Fatherhood, specifically in relation to children’s education, emerged as an important theme

throughout some participants' interviews. For example, in the first few minutes of our interview, Joe, discussed how his children had not had any support at their school in an affluent part of their town because the school management were not used to students' parents being in prison. He struggled with the guilt of missing his children's milestones while in prison. His main focus in prison became supporting his children, helping other fathers in prison keep in touch with their children and supporting others to re-engage with prison education.; As discussed in Chapter Seven, Joe described himself as a "conduit" between the prison education department and his fellow learners. Part of this role was writing a newsletter called "Family Guy", where he shared and celebrated educational achievements with prisoners' families. Education, particularly his children's education, was important to him and he wanted to share this passion with others. I suggest in this section that participants developed their roles as dutiful fathers by supporting their children to develop a positive engagement with schooling, and this served many functions in terms of their gendered trajectories and unfolding non-offender identities.

Critiquing lifecourse criminology for overlooking the gendered nature of desistance and persistence, Carlsson (2013) remarks that the markers of desistance – marriage, fatherhood, employment – are deeply embedded with masculine norms and the interaction with the gendered institutions of family and work. Morran (2023) elaborates that men desisting from crime struggle and feel anxious about what kind of man they will become without a criminal identity, especially those men who have achieved hegemonic masculinity by perpetrating violence in their formative years rather than achieving traditional markers of masculinity such as being the provider and protector in family formation. Morran (2023) argues that men "convey, to self and others, a commitment to a different kind of performance of masculinity" (p. 748) during the desistance process. He suggests that men whose transformative identities build on traditional masculine attributes have a higher chance of success as "presenting themselves as (heterosexual) men" (Morran, 2023, p. 748). I argue in this section that participants' investments in their children's educations are underpinned by multiple motivations and offer insight into how this influences the reshaping of gender subjectivity post-prison.

Although many of the participants talked about their children, Mike and Doug in particular discuss their children's educations in detail, elaborating on the reasons for investing in their educational success.

Mike: So, my experience of school, it was good and bad. I mean I wouldn't really change anything looking back. I mean it gives you experiences teachers doing this and saying that. I mean it's not all, how do you call it? Rose beds or rose petals.

AM: You mean, sort of seeing the world through rose-tinted glasses?

Mike: Yeah, that's it. It opens you up to it a little bit ya know? I've always been cautious with my children, because I've got three of them and I'd always, like, because when I was young no one used to help me. So, since my kids were young, I've always taught them to write, read, err, maths, Maths was my speciality. I got them the maths books. So, I was like, right, 'one hour with me, let's do the books.' So, now they all excel at school. My two oldest ones, 10 and 12, they excel at school. Like, mainly in maths.

Mike's reflections offer insight into multiple reasons and functions for helping his children through school. It is important to note that Mike began talking about his children's education directly after discussing his own experiences of schooling. He experienced elements of the School-to-Prison-Pipeline (STPP) including violence, labelling, targeting, oversurveillance and physical violence as an ethnic minority student, being singled out by White teachers (see Chapter Six). Supporting his children through school appears to be one way of protecting them from what he experienced. His protector and provider role are amplified through everyday activity as his method is to tutor them and encourage their focus on traditional subjects. Mike is able to assert himself within a heteronormative familial role post-release by emphasising his investment in fatherhood (Boonstoppel, 2019). However, the temporal nature of his activity "since my kids were young" (they are now 10 and 9 years old) suggests that this is a practice in which he engaged before he went to prison. This calls into question how much his investment in fatherhood is a protective factor against reoffending, however it still positions him as upholding his role as the protector of his children, therefore asserting a heteronormative role and, importantly, safeguarding their well-being in the school space by helping them to achieve, therefore weakening the STPP. He also reflects on how his parents had never helped him with school work, which suggests that they failed to help him navigate the racist practices of some teachers in the grammar school he attended. He remarks:

So, I'm really driven to help my kids, well because my mum and dad there was no real you know, they didn't really care about school, it was like, you go to school and then you leave and get a job. But me, with my children, 'I want you guys to be the best you can be.'

He talked about helping his daughter with her times tables even “while he was away” (in prison) and he “drums it into them” to work hard on their studies. His parents did not value education the way he does, and he wants them to achieve to the best of their ability and he is part of this process. Mike did not talk about his crime or how his imprisonment may have affected his children, instead his reflections focus on fulfilling his role as a father and investing in their futures and their wellbeing; this theme permeates the conversation on a range of topics. For example, he talked about the importance of finding work following his release and being able to build up his career in construction in order to provide for his family. He remarked that he and his partner had savings while he was away, but that they had nearly “run dry” and he was anxious to find work in order to provide. He described a strong work ethic, his motivation being to provide for his children but he also acknowledged: “It’s for me – My whole life I have worked.” He also discussed his reluctance to get into fights in prison for his children’s sake: “I mean I’ve got kids, it’s not like I’m not going to get involved.” He also expressed frustration about the exclusion order he was under at the time of interview, as he was unable to easily visit his kids and was residing in an AP: “So it’s really playing on my mind. I’m here, my children are there, my Mrs is there, and the offence was there. It makes no sense.” Mike’s commitment to work, his children and his wife are signs of desistance and getting back to “being normal, paying the bills.” The barriers he experienced included the exclusion zone and his PTSD, but it was evident that Mike was determined to reforge his identity away from crime, and to ensure that his children have a different start in life and the benefit of his protection and time.

Doug and Martin, who both experienced unmet needs connected to LDDs in schooling, talked about how their children have inherited their “genes” or “DNA” and both wanted to support them as a consequence. Doug has desisted from crime for a substantial amount of time, and his commitment to his son’s education was clearly an important part of how he invested his time post-prison. Similarly to Mike, Doug talked about his son’s education directly after recounting that his own experiences had featured key elements of the STPP. In reference to his son, he comments that “his schooling was far from simple, because he’s got a lot of my DNA. So, he’s Asperger’s. He’s ADHD, and school is a very uncomfortable place for him.” In this opening sentence, Doug demonstrated an understanding of, and support for, his son’s LDDs and neurodiversity that he never received as a child in his home or at

school (see Chapter Six). Doug's son attended "very good" schools in affluent areas due to Doug's work and study commitments at the time of his schooling. These schools did not have a strong understanding of LDDs and both he and his partner struggled to find the right support for his son. However, his son went on to participate and do well in final GCSE exams, despite ongoing barriers.

Had he not had the level of advocacy and support from me and his mum, he would have got nothing and been expelled because we worked in education and we were aware of... you know, there was many occasions we could challenge them, get the right people around the table. And so we fought tooth and nail for him, and he got his GCSEs.

As discussed in Chapter Two, children who are excluded from school experience a higher rate of LDDs than their counterparts who are never excluded from mainstream education. Because Doug's partner works in education, they were aware that his son's LDDs made him more vulnerable to exclusion. Furthermore, Doug's own experiences of school have evidently shaped this aspect of his parenting and it is clear that he wants to protect his son from similar detrimental experiences. Similarly to Mike's children, Doug's son has performed well at school and is currently in fulltime education studying an arts-based subject. I argue that Mike and Doug, via investment in their children's education, have disrupted elements of the STPP that they experienced. Advocating for their children in the school space, and investing time in helping them to build positive learner identities has helped their children to do well in education, and they have not experienced the pathologising and exclusionary practices that Mike and Doug experienced. As well as protecting their children from certain struggles at school, performing heteronormative behaviours through their fatherhood represents a highly visible and redemptive practice which contributes to these participants' non-offender identities and trajectories.

I argue that positioning themselves in paternal discourses has multiple outcomes: shoring-up their visibility as changed/desisted (Maruna, 2011), performing masculine signifiers of the protector and provider, and most importantly, supporting their children to have better futures by directly investing in their educations. Particularly for those children with LDDs, their fathers were able to offer understanding and support that they were bereft of in their own schooling.

"The Pedagogical Self": When 'Impossible Learners' Flourish

The final two sections return to the ‘impossible learner’. The following discussion analyses how some participants re-engaged with education post-release. Participation in education engendered a positive interaction with gendered institutions – namely, employment and higher education – and thereby reshaped individuals’ gendered subjectivity by developing alternative attributes such as vulnerability and empathy, but also new masculine hegemonic signifiers which serve to reinforce heteronormative identities. This was achieved for some by developing an intellectual learner identity through engagement in HE and, borrowing from Harris et al.’s (2017) study constructing a “pedagogy of the self” where mechanisms of higher education support the construction of a positive learner subjectivity. An additional way of constructing gender subjectivity was for participants to invest in being a ‘role model’ (Carlsson, 2013) in a peer support position within an ex-offender organisation. I argue that this not only contributes to Maruna’s (2021) redemption scripts and the “maintenance of desistance”, but also places the participant in a “father figure” role (Carlsson, 2013) where he can maintain his place of authority by upholding the heterosexual matrix, also serving as visual acts and reminders of reform (Maruna, 2021).

Four participants engaged in HE studies following their release from prison. Two of them, Doug and Matty, had previously experienced elements of the STPP including targeting by teachers and permanent exclusion from school, and went on to abuse drugs and enter into low level crime. The other two participants who progressed to HE were Tom and Joe; the former did not enjoy school whereas the latter excelled; both had experience of professional careers pre-prison. Seven participants worked for ex-offender organisations following their release and, as discussed in Chapter Five, this is explained by approach to sample selection. This section provides analysis of the ‘impossible learners’ identified in previous chapters whose learner identities and educational capabilities were particularly impacted by the intersection of class and gender in their school experiences. Remarkably, two of these men went on to flourish in HE and in ex-offender support organisations and an exploration of their journeys post-prison provides evidence of their strategies to re-engage with education on their own terms, rather than through formal channels of vocational education in prison.

Harris et al. (2017), drawing from Foucault’s ‘technologies of the self’, define a “pedagogy of the self” (p.363) discussing the impact of “practices of the self” on

fledgling learners subjectivities (p. 363). Harris et al. (2017) suggest that rather than reading off “social relations from fixed oppositional categories” (p. 362), it is necessary to understand emerging subjectivities “by viewing them as a set of narratives of self-production that are dispersed through a multiplicity of power relations that are actively secured” (p. 362). Becoming someone through pedagogy is considered a project of reinvention and offers insight into the narratives of participants in this study who navigated their way through HE post recovery from drug addiction and prison. Harris et al. suggest that the following key features lie at the core of the formation of the pedagogical self in the HE space: the role of the lecturers, dialogical encounters with peers, recognition of the Self in the Other, formative educational experiences, and an emerging academic vocabulary to conceptualise and process new knowledge and relate to one’s own experience. The cases I discuss below show that these areas are also entangled with the re-formation of gender subjectivity and that participants developed alternative gender qualities as well as hegemonic masculine identities to consolidate their place within a heteronormative framework.

As discussed in Chapter Six, Doug’s re-engagement with education began with Meriam in a secure recovery (from addiction) unit. Meriam was a skilled prison educator who led an interest-based learning space and did not ask her students to complete academic or vocational courses. Doug was clear that meeting her was an important turning point in his life. They discussed “ideas” connected to politics and she told Doug he was very intelligent. Her belief in Doug was clearly an ‘educational moment’ (Davies, 2006) for the emerging learner subjectivity of an ‘impossible learner’ who had been pathologised and excluded throughout his schooling. Matty also talked emphatically about the lecturers on his foundation course to HE and describes the social science access course as “Politics, Criminology and Equality” and recalled simply, “getting it.” He described how his lived experience supported his growing knowledge and skillset and he achieved distinction after distinction. He bonded with the group, “loved the tutors” and engaged wholeheartedly with the content. He suggested that the access course was an outstanding opportunity and helped him re-engage with education in a way that nothing before had:

Nothing has come close. The tutors, the classroom, the discussion, the back and forth. I found my old tutor on LinkedIn and told him nothing has come close. All that stuff, it really hasn’t come close at all.

Harris et al. (2017) suggest that in producing a pedagogical self, the students in his study were motivated to “examine how they were positioned within their social world, when engaged in an educative process that began with themes drawn from their immediate, concrete reality.” (p. 364). The authors describe that when they began interpreting new knowledges in the context of their own social biographies, their students began to understand themselves through recognition with others (Harris et al., 2017). This process included interpreting the social world through dialogic exchanges with peers and lecturers (Harris et al., 2017). Matty described how he embraced the content of his access course on criminology and equality, and how he “almost lived and breathed it” as he had lived experience to understand the theory. He reflects:

The first thing we ever spoke about was Stuart Hall’s moral panic, and I really got into understanding knife crime, and Akala, coming at it from a different perspective. But I had all this lived experience, so whenever I had all these theories coming at me, I could just listen to it, interpret it and ask, does that fit? So it works there, but not there I was getting distinctions and I just got right into it... And I started to sort of see that as part of who I am Instead of just Matty who works in recovery, I started to see that I had this other hat.

Matty began to see that his understanding of his own life as someone who had been addicted to drugs and experienced multiple inequalities extended beyond working in recovery; he began to acquire a vocabulary that supported scrutiny of the intersection of inequalities experienced as a child growing up in an insecure home. The “other hat” is an intellectual identity that supports his journey of self-discovery and scrutiny of his social world. Matty had just finished his Bachelor of Science (BSc) in Criminology and had aspirations to do a Doctor of Philosophy (PhD) one day. The transformation of a once-resistant ‘impossible learner’ identity to an authoritative, academic voice on inequality, is credit to his engagement with HE.

Doug also began his intellectual journey in a supportive environment inside a secure addiction recovery unit and he described how being able to be vulnerable in a classroom space was critical to moving forward with understanding his LDDs and developing a learner subjectivity that was viewed positively by others. He described Meriam’s classroom:

Um it was interesting reading and looking at what others were doing. And just that kind of sense of that classroom where there is a sense of learning from each other, discussion, debate. 'cause it was like a therapeutic environment as well you kind of develop bonds with people you wouldn't feel so vulnerable

to get things wrong. Um, you know, and people would be supportive of you, and you know, explain stuff.

Doug struggled with prison education because he found it patronising after seeing pad-mates' worksheets; however, in this learning environment, within the recovery unit, he was able to discuss ideas connected to intellectual subjects such as politics, and develop his confidence as well as bonds with other learners. Importantly, as Doug mentioned in the extract above, he was able to feel vulnerable in this space. As discussed in previous chapters, vulnerability is not an emotion that is often permitted in the social space of the prison. This quality, developed in prison – which is often not compatible with a hegemonic masculine identity, and is connected with a loss of power in the hierarchy of prison (see Chapter Three) – helps to shape gender subjectivity away from toughness as part of Doug's desistance journey.

An important element in understanding Doug's developing learner subjectivity is an understanding of his LDDs. After Meriam commented that Doug's articulate oral skills did not match what he wrote on paper, with her support, he decided to undertake an educational psychologist's assessment. His LDDs, which had dramatically affected his schooling and confidence as a learner – dyslexia, dyspraxia, ADHD – and their lack of recognition in the school classroom left a legacy of a fear of failure (see Chapter Seven). However, he described being able to use his "weaknesses" to his advantage, and develop an intellectual position of authority on his own experiences of exclusion, stigma and educational inequalities. He remarked that the LDDs gave him:

an obsessive, not giving up kind of drive to do things. And I suppose that's combined with my addictive personality as well. So, I got addicted to getting this stuff right.

This strong work ethic, combined with perfectionism, allowed him to begin "building up a knowledge, building a literature, having something to say that I'm deeply invested in, something that I can speak with authority on." Harris et al. (2017) argue that acquiring academic literacy enables students to "name past and current experiences and imbue them with meanings and reflexively to articulate self-representations to themselves and others" (p. 365). By allowing himself to feel vulnerable in a space that previously caused him harm, Doug has been able to develop an intellectual learner identity that has shaped his gender and learner

subjectivity post-prison. By developing alternative aspects of hegemonic masculinity (Morran, 2023) such as intellectualism and academic authority, but also allowing for vulnerability and reflection, Doug has been able to develop a pedagogy of the self and develop a learner identity that eventually supported him to complete his doctorate at an esteemed university.

Brett tried to engage with HE during his twenties; he enrolled in a degree course, but got into a fight one night in the first term, lost his essays, and eventually gave up on university. Brett's formal re-engagement with learning post-prison, and the development of his "pedagogical self", began instead in his workplace with a prominent ex-offender charity. He talked about mentorship and how his managers supported him to learn and grow. The ex-offender employment sector is unique for prison leavers as the environment is protected from the stigma and the struggle that people who have a criminal record often experience in accessing employment. It was through building up his "skills, knowledge and abilities" that he was able to value himself again, in contrast with his schooling and prison days where he suffered with isolation. In this organisation, he developed capabilities and was motivated by sharing his knowledge with others once in a managerial position: "If I learn, you learn" he remarks. This appears to be Brett's motivation on the day of the interview when he described his recent support for a prison leaver with schizophrenia. He empathised deeply and has a strong understanding of people experiencing mental health issues and how to help them on their journey to recovery. He was able to offer meaningful relational support as he had been through this type of struggle. By developing empathy for others and witnessing the struggles they faced through his own positioning and past he recognised himself in the Other (Harris et al., 2017) and at the same time developed nurturing and caring qualities, often placed in the sphere of the feminine. As discussed in Chapter Seven, Brett was interested in art, usually a subject associated with femininity (H. Nichols, 2021) and this engagement supported his mental health. He discussed art with people who were grappling with mental health issues post-prison, and offered insights into how he moved forward.

Brett characterised his workplace as the "greatest learning and supportive environment" where he has clearly flourished. He remarked that the most agreeable aspect of working for this organisation is being able to be himself and operating free from stigma:

It gives my colleagues freedom to talk about our experiences in the professional environment and not feel like they need to hold back. Being able to have a reasonable conversation and use your experiences, rather than being round a dinner table with friends because you don't want that person to be looking at you, or to be looking at your partner, or looking at your son differently. So, in this environment, I'm – more comfortable to a degree, which means that it's a happy place.”

The lack of stigma within his workplace gave Brett freedom; freedom to learn, freedom to flourish and to belong, on personal, social and professional levels. He was able to develop educational capabilities that directly support his desistance journey and follow a redemption script where he was helping others and asserting a “role model” position and thereby maintaining his desistance (Carlsson, 2013). This transformation occurred in a supportive space where he had freedom to be himself, including talking openly about his past where he can help others move forward. Being a ‘role model’ also encapsulated the gendered positioning of a father figure; he was able to help others with his knowledge and the open use of experiences of (recovery from) mental health difficulties and imprisonment. Being empathetic and caring demonstrates qualities in this peer support role which are traditionally viewed as more feminine. However giving advice from a paternal positioning also gives Brett the authority of a guiding force, the knowledge-bearer, and the one who has journeyed and battled through desistance, elsewhere described as a “heroic struggle” and becoming a “proper man” (Morran, 2023, p. 739). Interestingly, Matty and Doug, despite their intellectual identities and academic acumen, also continue to work in front-facing roles where they can use their lived experience as well as their academic knowledge and literacy to support those at the beginning of their desistance and recovery journeys.

Doug, Matty and Brett demonstrate different modes of engagement with education and desistance journeys post-prison and in diverse ways develop a “pedagogy of the self”.(Harris et al., 2017). The different mechanisms described in the construction of the learner subjectivity are entangled with reforming gender subjectivity. This includes embracing a wider frame of gender signifiers to express subjectivity, such as being vulnerable in an educational space, and developing empathy for those who are struggling. There is also a retention of masculine hegemony among participants through adopting a “father role” in peer mentoring, as well as developing a new vocabulary to describe their journeys and an intellectual

learner identity that shores up the heteronormative positionings of men in HE. Re-formed learner identities are entangled with the reshaping of gender subjectivities and while ‘feminine’ qualities – such as vulnerability and nurture – are developed during their learning journeys, masculine hegemonic signifiers are reproduced through alternative characteristics to toughness seen in previous chapters, and instead, intellectual identities and ‘father figure’ roles are evinced in their front-facing employment roles post-release.

This section closes with Matty’s description of the importance of belonging to a community post-release. He suggests that connecting with others is at the heart of moving forwards in a desistance and recovery journey. This suggests that developing a positive non-offender identity is a relational endeavour rooted in supporting, sharing and reflecting with others.

It’s more about group membership, I mean, group identity, with people who are all aiming for a common purpose. It’s about building connections... it’s about volunteering, doing education, doing courses, connecting with people. Connecting yourself and embedding yourself into a community that kind of gives you that space to create a new positive identity. If you’re not out doing it with people, shoulder to shoulder, making connections, then I think you’re onto a, er, what do you call it, a pathway to nothing.

Matty further remarks that “feeling like you belong is the key. And that’s what I got. And that’s what I still get.” Sadly, a commonality in the narratives described in the following section is a lack of belonging, a lack of hope and a move further away from education and understanding the barriers that may hold prison leavers back. The next section analyses the ‘impossible learners’ who were arguably on a “pathway to nothing” or in gendered terms, experiencing the ‘cul-de-sac’ of masculinity (Connell, 2005).

Impossible Learners, Impossible Bodies: “I’ve Lost All my Confidence, I Couldn’t Walk into a Classroom Now”

Participants discussed in this section demonstrated a sense of increasing exclusion and alienation from the community, as well as demonstrating entrenched and unaltering gender identities connected to violence and toughness, and persistent ‘impossible learner’ identities which are not compatible with the ‘growing up’ (Carlsson, 2013) needed to assume adult masculine signifiers. I will explore this disconnection through ‘impossible learner’ interactions with key gendered institutions of employment, heterosexual relationships and fatherhood through analysis of participants’ narratives. Their experiences are markedly different to the participants

discussed above and I extrapolate how barriers to developing educational capabilities are bound up with entrenched gender subjectivities as well as intersecting with class and power imbalances.

Carlsson (2013) argues:

Whereas being able to transform oneself as a man is often a key also to desist from crime, we must remember that not to be able to do this has implications; persistence is impelled by the offender not being able to make the transition into male adulthood. (p. 683)

The emphasis in this section is on 'impossible learners' trying and failing to attain adult masculine status, rather than outwardly rejecting roles and norms of adult masculinity in their narratives. On the contrary, many wanted to be in stable heterosexual relationships, to be protective fathers and they coveted secure employment. Their challenges appeared to relate to the unresolved barriers of LDDs and mental health as well as struggling to move on from harmful gendered practices including performing violence in spaces where it is not normative or accepted, such as employment, the family and relationships (see Chapter Eight). The following section will discuss issues with employment, heterosexual relationships, fatherhood and finally the lack of development of educational capabilities, which I argue renders some prison leavers unable to move forward.

It is important to acknowledge that the participants in this section have very little support post-release in comparison to those discussed above, and the majority of participants in this study who enjoyed the support of family and partners. Some participants had been living in APs for over a year, and many could not envisage how they could move to the next stage of renting independently, due to exorbitant rents and being unable to work. Stuart, Joel, Cassie and Connor, as discussed in previous chapters, are all receiving PIP benefits due to incapacity to work. Stuart had physical and mental health issues and due to the injuries sustained in his last violent crime, he was unable to do his painting and decorating job. Joel has been banned from the local employment agency and has been fired from most jobs due to assaulting colleagues, managers and members of the public. Cassie and Connor are both trying to move forward but issues connected to failing health and stigma are holding them back from returning to life in the community.

Participants who were in a job at the time of interview were either living independently or with family. Those who were unemployed were living in APs.

Participants who were undertaking vocational courses with the social enterprise which specialises in work connections and skill-building, had already spent years in a trade and held numerous vocational qualifications. These participants were experienced in diverse areas of construction, painting and decorating and plastering and were doing the construction courses in order to find work as quickly as possible following their release. Some needed to provide for their families, others were saving up to set up their own businesses. Although post-release employment is focussed on rehabilitation models, and vocational education for offenders is regarded as a conducive way to decrease reoffending (see Chapter Two), the reasons many people are in prison have very little to do with lack of employment before committing their crimes (Costelloe & Warner, 2014). As the following account of one participant's attempt at 'going straight' highlights, simply getting a job is not the issue. Rather, there is a complex interaction with institutions that can negatively hold people back, in combination with entrenched harmful attitudes about their offending, a lack of personal reflection and the limitedness of prison education. The interplay of these factors impacts upon the reformation of participants' subjectivities, which I argue has gendered implications.

As I have argued that Doug's desistance journey began in prison, I suggest that Connor's failed attempt at desistance also began in prison, and ended on the street the following day when he relapsed and then began selling methamphetamine after a failed attempt at "going straight". As Bottoms and Shapland (2011) argue, desistance can begin with the agency of an individual wanting to reform, but the process of reformation is highly dependent on the institutions and societies in which proposed reform takes place. Connor engaged in a work-related programme during his time in prison to gain qualifications to work on the construction of railway tracks in his local area. The programme allowed him to work on the railway track three days per week whilst still in prison, and then after release, he would have well-paid fulltime work. In order to succeed in this course, he needed to stop taking any recreational drugs, complete Level 1 maths and English, and show a willingness to work hard. Connor had passed all the requirements and was next on the list to start work with the railway company. However, due to an administrative error, that same day, the

prison put him 'on tag'³ and ordered his release. He argued that he was supposed to be starting with the railway company the next day, but the prison officers did not listen and demanded he collect his things as they were releasing him from the prison. Connor was furious and refused to leave. He barricaded himself in his room and refused to go. The officers "twisted him up" – a forceful type of restraint – and he was thrown out of the prison and his chances to enter the employment programme were extinguished. He was not permitted to work whilst on tag as this was one of the stipulations from the railway company. The same day, Connor began dealing again. Connor told this story twice, repeating it in both interviews. He described it as a "stitch up" and said that if he had been able to do the work programme, he would "still be working there today." Connor believed this was his chance at "going straight" and he invested in the process. However, due to an administrative error and unsupportive officers, this chance of employment no longer presented an opportunity to live a different life. Comparing this to Otis's altercation with a prison officers in Chapter Seven, Connor does not have the same confidence, authority or vocabulary to argue and hold the officers to account as Otis did. Otis promised a paper trail of evidence and directly implicated the officers who were not doing their jobs properly by threatening to speak to their supervisors. Connor did not have Otis's years of management experience; he was not able to argue coherently and reverted to using the only tool that he had– his body – and physically resisted.

I find Connor's story one of the most poignant episodes in the narratives. It was clear how desperately he wanted this chance to turn his life around – he got clean, he engaged in education even though his previous comments revealed the fear and vulnerability he experienced around being in the classroom space (see Chapter Seven) and yet he wanted to engage in "straight" employment, just as the prison system encourages offenders to do. Due to errors out of his control and his lack of power in the fallout, this opportunity was taken away from him. Understood through a Butlerian lens, Connor is constrained by the discursive practices of imprisonment and although he is able to enact his agency by resisting authorities and performing tough masculinities, this ultimately works against him and it is not enough to change the course of events in the prison space, hegemonic masculinities

³ Home Detention Curfew,, also known as 'going on tag' is where the remainder of a prisoner's sentence is served in the home setting. People are subject to electronic surveillance during this time. See [When Can a Prisoner Be Released on Tag?](#)

are often defined by toughness and physical intimidation, however when it involves an interaction with the practices of the institution, enacting agency through this type of gender performance renders Connor subordinate. I argue that, in this episode, Butler's caution on "both the subject and the scene of agency depend on what constrains them for their very constitution." (Salih, 2004, p. 243). Connor's gender subjectivity is constituted by the discursive practices of imprisonment, and his tough and violent identity has helped him navigate through dangerous, masculine spaces. However, the opportunity for desistance is constrained by his inability to fight an immovable institution.

Connor's story is one example of the complexity of securing work and a foiled attempt at a desistance process. Interactions with institutions, unresolved LDDs and unsupported physical and mental health issues all conspire to thwart Connor's attempt at "going straight" and taking up conventional employment. Joel for example, has never been offered (or perhaps in his younger days, never accepted) interventions or assistance for his mental health. He has never undergone a psychological assessment although he read on his MAPPA form that professionals suspected bipolar disorder and ADHD. Unlike the participants in the previous section, Joel had never had help to understand how his LDDs and mental health issues affected him, he continued to struggle with violent outbursts and was unable to hold down employment. Vocational courses in prison and the community were not enough to support Joel to begin a desistance journey. He needed support to unpick the substantive barriers that prevented him from moving forward, including relying on violence to solve interpersonal problems.

The 'impossible learners' coveted stable relationships and family life, though these participants struggled to make relationships work and to be the supportive, present fathers and partners they wanted to be. These issues echo some of the barriers they faced in terms of employment with regard to interpersonal relationships. I argue that this is largely due to a constellation of masculine signifiers that do not mould easily to new ideas or identities. Instead, they seem to repeat the same mistakes. Stuart, for example, spent much of the interview discussing failed relationships yet repeatedly stated how he wanted to settle down and grow old with someone. As described in Chapters Five and Eight, Stuart's subjectivity was constituted by heteronormative framings highlighted by his expression of masculine attributes in the interview space (attractiveness, muscularity, toughness, romantic

and sexual relationships, etc.) and at the same time he was plagued by fears of not living up to heteronormative roles and worried about living alone in his old age. He talked at length about his last relationship with a “younger woman” and how she was the reason he became embroiled in his latest crime, a violent altercation where he acquired a large scar across his cheek (see Chapter Eight). It was difficult to follow exactly what happened but Stuart insisted that he was not to blame and he was the victim. He also talked about a relationship with a married woman who he “ended up having a kid with” but that “went pear-shaped too.” Stuart’s narrative was often based in a victim discourse and it appeared that, similarly to his recollections of his crimes, he was unable to reflect and take responsibility for his part in the relationship failures in his life.

Although Stuart talked about his children, he simply stated he was estranged from them and did not seem troubled by it. Joel, on the other hand, describes how he found out his two-year-old daughter was not biologically his, and it felt like “death” to find this out. He said, “I’m never seeing that little girl again,” and began to stutter and appeared visibly upset. He went on to cite further terrible tragedies in his life, including his father’s and mother’s violence as well as his step-father’s suicide as the reasons that he had become violent. He suggested that his offending behaviour was entirely motivated by others letting him down, especially his father, and Joel never accepted responsibility himself. He said:

Joel: It affects your life.... I-I-I- [*stutters*] bring in somebody. It was like I looked at it like death. You know, I’m not saying I’m not seeing that kid again

AM: I’m sorry.

Joel: And that’s it, you know, I mean, it’s just, it’s just, it’s the thingy of my life. I mean, it’s why, it’s why I’ve been so violent. That’s why I’ve done the things I’ve done, you know? I mean, it’s like I’ve not done nothing for no reason. There’s been a reason behind everything.

I argue that some of the ‘impossible learners’ remain stuck in a victim discourse, blaming others for their own behaviour (Gadd & Farrall, 2004). Unable to learn new ways of thinking and with unmet needs connected to LDDs and unresolved mental health issues, the difficulty of identity transformation is exacerbated for these participants and entrenched, harmful ways of performing masculinity remain prominent in their lives. For Stuart and Joel, I did not ask about re-engaging with education in the community as the majority of the interview time

had served as a space for them to talk about their childhoods, relationships, crimes and anxieties. Stuart's contested relationship with education and his unresolved issues connected to suspected dyslexia demonstrated negative feelings towards education and he avoided these topics of discussion as much as possible.

Connor on the other hand, had a different perspective on both culpability for his behaviour and re-engaging with education in the future. Connor expressed that he would like to do a peer mentoring course. He believed he had "a lot to offer someone recovering from drug addiction" and also wanted to do a DJ-ing course with an ex-offender charity as his passion is rave music. He talked honestly about the barriers to "going straight":

I suppose the barriers are like, I might find it a bit awkward to associate with people that don't take drugs – or not so much straight people, but like, I don't know any straight people – but like, just finding meself making conversation and like what do they chat about, and so that's self-inflicted, I got to find a way around that.

If he went ahead with the music course, his support worker would be a young woman from the same estate as him. She was also in prison for supply of drugs, but went on to work in the community and continued in her recovery. Connor was very excited about working with her, and clearly his inhibitions about working with people who were "straight" were non-existent with this support worker. Shared experience and background helped to dissipate the divide and allowed Connor to be himself. This demonstrates the importance of peer networking and how desistance is a social process where individuals need the support of reformed offender networks that have lived experience, and can offer judgement-free empathy. When I asked Connor about what advice he would give to a younger person as a peer mentor, after a long and thoughtful pause he suggested: "Be your own person, believe in yourself. Take one step at a time, one day at a time." Connor was not interested in blaming other people for his crimes or drug abuse. He felt the buck stopped entirely with him, although when he discussed barriers to his desistance journey, it was clear that his agency to stay away from the world of drugs was relational: "The devil makes work for idle hands". Connor's perspectives emphasise that importance of people with lived experience of desistance and recovery working with individuals who are attempting to move away from crime. This shared experience helps to reduce stigma and affords people more freedom to be themselves.

Although Connor did not seem constrained by a victim discourse, he did appear to be influenced by a constellation of masculine signifiers that are shaped by the discursive practices of tough masculine subjectivity. As noted in Chapter Eight, Connor talked about younger people in terms of supporting them to recover from addiction; however, just a few minutes previously, he had indicated that he would “put holes” in a younger person that was pretending to be tough. Connor’s connection to this past and the discursive practices connected to drugs and violence also manifested in more subtle ways. For example, in the last few minutes of our interview, Connor told me about a “sick book” he was reading about a Mexican drug cartel. The story was about money, violence and the supply of drugs. The enthusiasm with which Connor talked about the characters, who seemed to display tough and violent identities, was suggestive that Connor’s psyche was still very much fixated on the underworld of organised crime. Although he was attempting to change his ways through empathy with younger people, as well as engaging in music education, the challenges of changing his fundamental gendered subjectivity may reveal another dimension to the “pains of desistance” (Nugent, & Schinkel, 2016).

The final participant in this section is Cassie, another ‘impossible learner’ whose gendered barriers were of a different nature to the other participants in this section, although he did experience some similar unresolved issues that impeded his ability to move forward. Cassie is a participant who struggled with a subordinate masculine subjectivity for whom education had become an escape during his prison sentence. However, when he moved prisons, encountering a comparatively poor education department led him to get a job in the workshops, away from education, which research has shown to have a different emotional climate to other parts of the prison (Crewe et al., 2014). Cassie was bullied and it led to him planning his suicide.

At the time of his interviews, Cassie was living in an AP and was estranged from family. He had a girlfriend who struggled with his ex-offender status. He mostly spent his days watching TV and reading. He was suffering from mental health issues, including depression and anxiety. He was not working and was in receipt of UC. Cassie enjoyed learning despite struggling at school, and in particular, described his love of English literature. He mentioned that one of his ambitions was to do an English degree and he even attained funding during his time engaging with the responsive prison education department, however he lost motivation and confidence

when he was transferred to a different prison. I tentatively asked Cassie if he had consider re-engaging with education now that he is back in the community:

AM: Would you consider doing any kind of education in the community now?

Cassie: No, because at the moment, my confidence is at rock bottom. My confidence has gone again [*voice breaks*].

AM: Ok yeah.

Cassie: I don't like living here.

AM: Right. How long have you been here for?

Cassie: Since October last year.

AM: Ok.

Cassie: This is another one with me, it's noise. You know noise. It's not just a noise where you hear a noise and you go, "Oh", to me, any noise is amplified. And it just annoys me. It makes me so anxious. And so angry.

Cassie was not residing in a comfortable environment. He linked his lack of confidence to re-engage with education with his accommodation and the struggle he felt sharing communal spaces with other ex-offenders. Cassie talked about the other residents and suggested that Stuart (another participant) is a "hardened criminal". By contrast, Cassie had only been in prison once and did not intend to go into prison again. He described low-level bullying where other residents of the AP ask for his coffee, sugar and milk and he gives it to them, "for a happy life." It was clear that Cassie was far from happy and felt very alone in this world. He did not have the confidence to move forward. Cassie said "he is not a mixer" and explained that he struggles to engage with others, as he did at school and in prison. The main barriers that seemed to be stopping Cassie from re-engaging with education were his lack of confidence, unmet mental health and his difficult living conditions. He described struggling with depression (discussed in Chapter Seven) and also obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD). He explained how both in prison and in the community he had only ever been given fact sheets on anxiety and had never been able to receive face-to-face help. When I asked Cassie what his next steps were, he became flummoxed. He simply said, "I haven't thought about it really." He did not know the area where he was living and it was the first time he has been away from his home town. Although Cassie was not interested in committing any further crime, it was clear that he felt stuck with regard to how he might move forward with his life. Cassie appeared trapped within a subordinate masculine identity status. He was

interested in education, however his confidence was too low to re-engage in the community. The relationships he did have continued to reify his subordinate masculine positioning, and this appeared to inhibit planning a move forward in his life.

Conclusion

As this chapter has illustrated, achieving adult masculine milestones can be a complicated process for formerly imprisoned men and their success at realising a heteronormative trajectory depends on intersectional locations, interactions with institutions and positively participating in educational spaces where they can develop educational capabilities. This chapter has mapped these interactions, trajectories and capabilities and has offered insight into the gendered barriers men face when attempting to move away from crime, as well as some of the gendered strategies participants have used to successfully develop a non-offender identity. Some strategies involved developing traditional hegemonic masculine roles such as being a present father and investing in children's education (which served to disrupt elements of the STPP). Developing intellectual identities in the space of HE, as well as becoming a member of a community and engaging with others on a similar journey also proved useful in developing a masculine identity away from crime.

Not all participants achieved successful outcomes in their desistance journeys. Some appeared unable to move away from constellations of masculine signifiers like violence and toughness, and therefore repeated gendered performances that were detrimental to their futures and chances of desistance. Drawing upon Brett's ideas in the first part of this chapter, these participants do not have the "freedom to grow" or in Joe's words, the capability to "right" themselves. Stuck in poverty, being unable to re-engage with vocational careers, struggling with a combination of mental health issues, unresolved LDDs and for some, remaining in a victim discourse without reflection stopped them from moving forward. It also prevented a growth into adult masculinity. Although many craved the signifiers of hegemonic gender subjectivities – employment, heterosexual relationships, fatherhood – they were entrenched in both harmful hegemonic and subordinate ways of doing masculinity and engaging with education to transform their 'impossible learner' identities to "acceptable", continued to be a distant feat.

Chapter Ten: (Re)Shaping the lives of adult male prison leavers

Introduction

What am I now that I was then?
May memory restore again and again
The smallest colour of the smallest day:
Time is the school in which we learn,
Time is the fire in which we burn.

Calmly We Walk This April's Day

Delmore Schwartz

I opened this thesis with above poem, “Calmly We Walk This April's Day.” Schwartz's poem is in an inquiry into the passage of time and how memory can shape our identities in the present and help answer the question, “Who am I now that I was then?”. By delving into their past and sharing poignant and sometimes painful memories of schooling, prison and life after release, the participants in this study candidly shared their life stories with me. My hope is that by offering an interpretation of their subjective experiences, I have helped to answer Scharzt's question and developed insight into the educational journeys and shape shifting identities of men who experience the justice system.

This thesis also opened with a stark analysis of the state of prisons in 2025. Suicide, violence, self-harm, an ongoing drugs epidemic and a beleaguered prison staff are everyday realities in prisons across England and Wales. As this thesis has shown, those on the margins have fewer opportunities to engage with education in school, prison and in the community after release, and many struggle to move on from entrenched gendered behaviours which lead them into a revolving door of offending. Although there were stories of hope and success in this study, those who experienced extreme marginality in schooling, continued to experience exclusion,

violence and stigma throughout their lives. School, for some participants, was learning how to navigate marginal spaces rather than preparing them for fulfilling, working lives, and many went on to experience a lifetime of educational disengagement, prison and poverty.

Why gender and education?

I argued in chapter one that an account of gender and education in prison leavers' lives is an emergent body of work. It was also argued that despite the recent interest in prison education and the literature that maps prisoners' educational capabilities and trajectories, there is an absence of analysis through an intersectional and gendered lens. Despite a further expansive body of work which explores masculinities in diverse educational contexts, scant attention had been paid to the entanglement of education and gender in the lives of formerly imprisoned men. In response to this dearth of empirical research, this study has drawn on an interdisciplinary framework using feminist poststructuralist and intersectional lenses, and has examined the complex intersection between gender and education in prison leavers' lives. These questions interrogate and analyse aspects of the nexus between gender and education throughout the lives of men who have been in prison. I have built on these two rich but largely separate strands of research, bringing them together by shining a light on the complexities of prison leavers' educational narratives and gendered experiences. I have offered key insights into how gender is performed, constructed, disrupted and maintained in diverse educational spaces.

In order to understand the key issues better, I initially planned to explore gender and education in prisons, and applied to the Ministry of Justice to conduct in-person interviews inside a category C prison. As Chapter Five documents, data collection became a difficult journey with obstacles connected to the COVID-19 pandemic. I therefore decided to change my research design and recruit participants in the community, by working in partnership with four organisations which support prison leavers upon re-entry into society. I also leaned on professional and personal networks to assist with sample selection. After obtaining ethical clearance from both the National Research Council (NRC) at the Ministry of Justice (MoJ), and the IOE ethics committee at UCL, I was able to interview 20 adult male prison leavers, both in-person and online, at various sites across England. The participants' ages ranged from early twenties to early fifties, and they came from diverse ethnic and social

class backgrounds, and had experienced upbringings ranging from stable and comfortable environments to navigating childhood with violent, absent and troubled parents. By engaging with narrative and feminist methodologies, this study has offered an understanding of how education features in the lives of prison leavers through diverse locations and institutions including the school, the prison and in the community following release from prison.

The following section answers the research questions and offers a comprehensive understanding of the deep and complex relationships which exist between gender subjectivity and educational capabilities, evidenced through participant narratives. I offer policy initiatives and generative ideas for future research. To end, my final and overall reflections on the study.

The Shaping of Gendered Lives: Education Engendered and Interrupted

In response to the overarching research question, 'How does the relationship between gender subjectivity and educational capabilities shape the lives of adult male prison leavers?' I will map the overall findings of this study. As I argued in Chapter One, the policy debates surrounding prison leavers' educational trajectories often positions them within a 'problem discourse' reducing their educational experiences to a deficit narrative – exclusion, underachievement and LDDs (Valencia, 2010). The findings from this study, which has centred an account of gender subjectivity and corresponding intersectional locations, offer a more nuanced perspective on prison leavers' experiences of participation and educational (dis)engagement, success and failure. I have explored the influence of peer dynamics, family adversity, structural disadvantage and the role of school mechanisms on the outcomes and the shaping of masculine identities in schooling, especially tough positionalities. Educational disengagement during schooling was identified in the narratives of the vast majority of the men I interviewed. This detachment was both interrupted and engendered in the prison and community space in varied, illuminating ways. For some, advantages in schooling such as having supportive parents and help with pastoral elements of education, supported an expansion of capabilities later on in life, in both formal and informal contexts in the prison and community. Some prison leavers used their skills and former professional occupations to obtain roles of power and responsibility within the education department and to support 'box-ticking' as part of sentence planning (H.

Nichols, 2021). This reinforced reciprocal relations of protection and advantage and fed into discourses which negated vulnerability, which has been identified as a relational risk in the literature (Maguire, 2021; Murray, 2020; Ricciardelli, 2015).

Participants who enjoyed opportunities in schooling, whether they expanded on them or not at the time, were generally able to flourish in prison education and participation supported their confidence levels as well as strengthening planning behaviours which were deemed as compliance and viewed favourably by prison authorities. Discourses of reason and rationality feature heavily in the retelling of these experiences and negotiating social dynamics. So, for some, gender subjectivities and educational capabilities combined to support their ways of navigating prison education and then contributed to securing employment on release. Participants from more stable backgrounds, who experienced fewer adversities in schooling, were able to develop further capabilities to both navigate prison and participate in prison education, thereby further expanding their capabilities in the community. Many continued their studies, secured employment and were more likely to experience material advantage on release.

Those who had been excluded from school and had fewer opportunities to expand their educational capabilities. I have interpreted these participants as assuming a subject position of 'impossible learner'. This positioning is articulated by Youdell's interpretations of excluded learners as "impossible learners" who are unable to conform to school discourses and take up "ideal learner" positionings due to their excluded status and non-conformist identities. After challenging experiences in school, these participants took different trajectories in prison and re-entry, depending on the support they received. Some received diagnoses of LDDs whilst in secure recovery units and forged an understanding of the barriers they had experienced to learning. This understanding supported a reconnection with education and expanded capabilities to participate in education. Capabilities through education were realised through alternative pedagogies and moving away from the vocational model in prison. Some participants described a decision to avoid vocational trades such as construction. Instead, they favoured subjects which offered an avenue to explore and express difficulties with mental health in prison, such as art. Others engaged with sociology, and began a journey of understanding how their experiences of injustice and inequality shaped their identities and entry into criminal pathways. Former 'impossible learners' once in a supportive environment where they

could drop the 'mask' of toughness, and be vulnerable in the educational space and explore alternative gender expressions, engaged with education and many flourished.

Prison education was also an escape, or "haven" for those who struggled with others hypermasculinity and violence on the wings. Some immersed themselves in education to avoid violence and bullying, but this strategy did not immunise them completely, and participants describe experiencing threats of harm and planning retaliation to avoid vulnerability. However, some participants continued to struggle with ongoing issues connected to LDDs, mental health and neurodiversity and these ongoing issues proved to exacerbate harmful gendered practices. Prison education practices and procedures further marginalised those who struggled to engage with education in schooling, with assessment procedures and traditional learning techniques further alienating them.

Violent practices were constructed in school, on the street and in prison and the body was implicated in convincing and successful gendered performances. Performing behaviours connected to discourses on violence and tough masculinities was central to subjectivity formation for some participants, however deteriorating physical and mental health undermined these tropes and the fragility of identities was exposed in the space of the interview. 'Sticky' masculine signifiers, such as scars and reputations for violence, connected to the construction of both learner and gender subjectivities both endured and became unstuck, resulting in complex and messy entanglements in navigating conflicting identity positions. In short, 'impossible learners' attempted to reconcile 'impossible bodies.' The desistance journeys of these participants were more fragile as a consequence, with some citing imagined violence or fantasies of violence against others in the interview space. Educational capabilities were further constrained, and these participants were left with fewer and less effective tools to navigate prison and life in the community after release from prison.

Those who were able to disrupt, re-engage or engage with education for the first time during prison and in the community presented more positive desistance journeys. Many had attained employment and were continuing their educational journeys post-prison. Former 'impossible learners' talked about future educational and occupational opportunities and this appeared to have an impact on identities and shifts in gender subjectivity. Some described a strong investment in their children's

education and an effective disruption of the key elements of the STPP. Their children were flourishing in education despite LDD barriers and difficulties with teachers. Others also described the development of intellectual identities. This identity shift shored up more hegemonic masculine signifiers such as intellectualism and breadwinner role, as well as openly navigating issues of vulnerability and empathy in educational spaces, which would have been avoided in former roles in prison/street spaces. By engaging in a wider range of signifiers, gender expression is expanded and non-offender identities in the desistance process are realised.

In sum, this study has explored educational capability development among adult male prison leavers and how the construction of gender subjectivity is implicated in educational roles, identities, processes and pedagogies. Educational dis-/re-engagement and participation are entangled with how gender is performed in diverse spatial and temporal locations. Intersectional locations are important in understanding how social class, race, age and (dis)ability influence these relationships through the lifecourse and how participants navigate their journeys through vulnerability, adversity, (dis)advantage and opportunity. The following section will delineate the findings in more detail, drawing on the empirical chapters of this study and answering the subset of research questions.

Schooling and Complex Reasons for Educational Disengagement

In relation to research question one and an exploration of the schooling experiences of the participants, the ‘problem’ narrative that surrounds prison leavers’ schooling experiences and educational backgrounds has been scrutinised, and the complexity of prison leavers’ gendered subject positionings, through intersectional locations exposed. The following insights confirm that some ‘impossible learners’ were indeed ‘unteachable’ at points during their schooling, however the analysis in this thesis has offered multidimensional reasons for complex behaviours. Insights discussed include unmet needs connected to LDDs, gendered peer dynamics and emergent tough masculinities, complex family dynamics including absent, troubled and violent parents, gang related violence on the street and adult interventions, including oversurveillance, labelling and bias from teachers. Intersectional identities influenced the capacity of participants to respond to multiple axes of disadvantage, however, those who experienced the highest level of disadvantage continued to be excluded.

All participants (except one) experienced an interrupted education and/or educational disengagement. The reasons for the interruption and disengagement were varied amongst participants and support the diverse findings of studies cited in Chapters Two and Three. Several participants described gendered peer influence/dynamics including disruptive behaviours and being the 'class clown' (Francis, 2006, 2009; Frosh et al., 2000; Kolluri, 2023; Reay, 2002). Others referred to family adversity connected to violence, alcohol and drugs as a reason for educational disruption (McAra & McVie, 2010; Williams et al., 2012). Teacher behaviours and school practices including labelling, oversurveillance, isolation, suspensions and exclusions were also evidenced in the narratives and resulted in disrupted educations. These narratives reflect many of the key insights from the STPP (Bryan, 2020; Dancy, 2014; Graham, 2014; Ladson Billings, 2011; Stahl, 2017). Some participants experienced multiple disadvantages, and were often the ones permanently excluded from school, whereas others experienced fewer adversities but still struggled to engage. Disengagement reinforced the development of 'hard' masculine identities by spending more time on the street. Emergent tough masculine identities have been linked to early pathways into crime (Gadd & Jefferson, 2007). Unmet LDDs facilitated an othering discourse within the school space that contributed to isolation and underachievement, and sometimes led to exclusion.

Participants from diverse social backgrounds experienced different levels of support in terms of adult intervention, from both teachers and parents, which impacted on participation (Reay, 2017). The narratives of those from economically deprived backgrounds, on the whole, conveyed that they had received little adult support including from teachers, parents and social services. Those who did not receive assistance, or did not accept the help offered, struggled to stay in school and many were excluded, although some completed their schooling against the odds. Those from more affluent backgrounds received more support in terms of diagnosis of LDDs and support within the classroom, and this was largely due to parental involvement in terms of holding teachers to account on how to manage behaviours positively and inclusively. Those whose experiences involved more adult intervention were able to participate in mainstream education and complete their GCSEs. Despite middle-class students experiencing, on the whole, better educational opportunities and more adult intervention, especially around advocacy in diagnosing LDDs, many

also experienced sustained educational disengagement and did not always do well in high-stake tests.

Middle-class participants, from a range of ethnic backgrounds were less likely to report having been disruptive in school. On the whole, they had more active parents which could account for the difference in teacher behaviours, with one middle-class participant citing “educational nepotism”. Participants from more affluent backgrounds also discussed negative aspects of active parents including being overly-focussed on achievement and being “pushy”. Participants from immigrant backgrounds in particular recognised how their parents wanted a better future for them. This reflects the literature on how Black middle-class parents are eager for their children to succeed through education, often to neutralise deficit school discourses and perceptions, particularly for Black boys (Vincent et al., 2012a). Some of the participants with minority ethnic identities also discussed positive schooling experiences. Many other participants praised their teachers and some suggested their past behaviours were deeply complex and beyond reforming at the time. These mixed experiences with teachers are different to the STPP literature discussed in Chapter Three and discussed above, which mostly focuses on the negative behaviours of teachers and their role in poor educational outcomes. This mixed response echoes Arnez and Condry’s (2021) call for a move away from “binary constructions of responsibility” (p. 94), where either the learners or teachers are pathologised, and may warrant further understanding into how intersectional identities and the gendered peer dynamic features in the STPP.

Gender in the Prison Space: Educational Roles, Identities and Trajectories

The second research question focuses on the experiences of prison education and relationships in prison, and how performances of gender subjectivity features in these relations, further drawing out how gender and education shaped the lives of participants in this study. Prison scholars who have begun to unpack the relationship between gender and education in the carceral space focus on homosocial relations in educational spaces, a performance of masculinity for social acceptance and hierarchical positioning, a negotiation of vulnerability and the consequences for desistance (Carberry, 2017; Key & May, 2020; Maguire, 2021; Nichols, 2021). This study builds on this nascent literature and offers insights into how men in prison use education to navigate the carceral space. Educational

disengagement is both maintained and overcome in prisons. Gender subjectivity and intersectional identities play a central role in navigating barriers, overcoming disadvantage and developing reciprocal relations of support.

All 20 participants took part in prison education at some point. Some took the opportunity to improve their maths and English, whereas others engaged in arts-based subjects and vocational courses. A few talked enthusiastically about their experiences and described education as a lifeline during their time in prison, whereas others did not consider it integral to their experiences and described the ways in which they avoided prison education. Educational backgrounds, capabilities and identities played an integral role in determining how participants navigated and negotiated the wings; some participants moved away from education whereas others flourished in positions of responsibility. This acceptance of responsibility took the form of being a peer mentor and/or supporting teaching staff, as well as assuming informal roles such as being the “solicitor on the wing”. Participants leant into these roles as part of a strategy to survive the wings, using their skills and acumen to support those who would offer protection from vulnerability in return. Some tensions existed however with how privileged educational backgrounds impacted the identities of men who had held positions of responsibility before prison, especially those who had previously worked in senior positions in education. Men whose identities were constructed through positions of power before prison, struggled to perform hegemonic masculinity in an educational space during prison. Others described prison education as a fitting end to their teaching careers and built on their positive experiences beyond the prison gate.

Reason and rationality emerged as strong signifiers in the way that participants constructed their gender subjectivity (R. Connell, 2005) in relation to education, and as a constituent of the strategies employed to serve one’s sentences efficiently. These strategies included engaging with education and educational roles to ‘box tick’ and move to the next stage of their sentences. Participants also self-categorised according to type of crime and educational background. Some made distinctions between those who were incarcerated for violent crimes, and those who were in for crimes with a “thought process”, like fraud, and suggested the groups were categorised into ‘physical’ and ‘intellectual’. Further categorisations were made between those who engaged in education and planned their time effectively, and

those who were embroiled in the organised crime on the wings, and lived a more clandestine fate.

Those who benefitted from educational opportunities in schooling, discussed in Chapter Six, struggled less with the bureaucracy and difficulties in engaging with education in prison. Some who took the initial assessment on entry to prison, for example, described an increase in confidence after doing well in the test. Conversely, those who struggled with their schooling described the vulnerability inherent in engaging with education in prison. Showing weakness is a risk in carceral environments (Maguire, 2019; Ricciardelli et al., 2015), so it followed that showing educational vulnerabilities was to be avoided and this affected engagement. In some circumstances, participants described how educational processes fuelled aggressive behaviours and 'impossible learner' identities were exacerbated rather than interrupted or reformed.

Insights from this study offer new knowledge on supporting LDDs in the prison space, and whether a full psychological assessment would be useful for those who are initially screened in prison and are identified as having LDDs. Some participants in this study described receiving full educational psychological assessments during their time in secure addiction recovery units. These assessments emerged as a turning point for some learners in reconnecting with education, but also in how they performed masculinity. Most notably, participants talked specifically about the willingness to be vulnerable rather than suppressing emotion, including being more open to vulnerability in the educational space. I suggest that participants felt relieved that they were able to understand their difficulties from the past. They describe enlightening moments where they finally understood their behaviours in schooling and their abuse of drugs as coping strategies. Being diagnosed was a watershed moment in their lives and permission to move away from the pathologising they experienced in the past. By better understanding the cause of their difficulties, I suggest they no longer held themselves responsible, and with this knowledge they were able to move forward emotionally, including being more vulnerable and open about their LDDs.

Those who did not receive diagnosis or support to understand their LDDs, either in schooling or prison, and/or their concurrent mental health issues, continued to struggle with engagement. It followed that the shaping of gender subjectivity continued to be constructed through discursive practices connected to violence and

aggression. This same group, identified as educationally vulnerable, struggled with prison education bureaucracy and procedures, including initial assessments and asking for help with unmet learning needs. For some of the most educationally disaffected, the lack of basic numeracy and literacy skills had drastic consequences on the participants' ability to function after leaving prison, including a period of mental illness. This led to further cycles of reoffending.

Participants also offered insights into the type of course delivered and pedagogies used in prisons and how these impacted gender subjectivity (Zampini, Osterman, et al., 2019). In present-day prison education policy, success of an educational course is judged in terms of whether the participant has completed and passed the course, and if this can be linked to recidivism levels and future employment (Davis, 2013). The insights from this study suggest that it is only in the exploration of participant narratives and their interaction with an educational course in prison that elements of transforming to different identities can be understood. Some participants discussed how art had helped them navigate their way through mental health issues in prison and the 'pains of imprisonment', with some offering moving accounts of how they battled adversity from within their prison cells. Others were inspired by supportive classrooms, alternative pedagogies including an interest-led classroom and taking part in philosophy and literature courses. Some openly refused to engage in vocational trades post-prison, and discussed pathways undertaken to move away from physical work and manual labour. Few discussed motivations for prison education being connected to job opportunities on release or, indeed, unemployment being connected to why they committed crime in the first place (Crewe, 2011). Those who worked in vocational trades had already worked in their respective industries for many years, and the reasons they struggled with employment post-release were connected to more complex problems such as drug addiction, insecure housing, isolation and mental/physical illnesses (Nugent, & Schinkel, 2016).

Some prison leavers described prison education as a means of escape from the wings, accounts which support the findings in the literature which indicate that the education department offers an alternative emotional climate where masculinity can be performed differently (Crewe et al., 2014; Nichols, 2021; Szifris et al., 2018). Participants felt unsafe on the wings and described engaging in prison education as a lifeline, or the "saviour" of their time in prison. However, this appeared dependent

on the culture and the quality of the educational provision offered at the prison and some participants describe how their commitment to prison education did not immunise them from violence in other spaces. One prison leaver described an outstanding educational experience at one prison, however, when he was moved to another prison as part of his sentence plan, he encountered a department that had a “bums on seats” mentality. This led to an experience of educational interruption and disengagement, and a decision to work in the workshops where he became a target for bullying. Ultimately, he became suicidal and ended up withdrawing from prison life altogether (Murray, 2020).

These insights have drawn on the prison masculinities literature and have built on the work of the few prison scholars who have connected gender and education in the carceral space (Carberry, 2017; Maguire, 2021; H. Nichols, 2021; Zampini, Osterman, et al., 2019). Identifying relational masculinities, vulnerability, educational processes and pedagogies as sites for inquiry, the policy discussion below highlights the need for gender subjectivity to be taken into account when formulating education policy and prison curricula in a closed and gendered institution. The lens of intersectionality has shone a light on how intersections of (dis)advantage combine to further constrain or enable people in prison in terms of their backgrounds and in relation to other prisoners and authorities. These neglected areas should be understood through analysing the experiences of people in prison, and centring prison leavers’ insights when designing prison educational models, curriculums, policies and pedagogies.

Performing Violence, Negotiating Vulnerability: (Dis)Investments in Educational Trajectories

The third research question investigates the role of violence in educational spaces and life trajectories. Prison leavers’ accounts of violence support the literature which posits that violence is an important resource for performing a tough masculinity in diverse social spaces (Messerschmidt, 2005b; Parkes & Conolly, 2013; Ringrose & Renold, 2010) and a way of negotiating and negating personal vulnerability (de Viggiani, 2012; Gooch, 2019; Jewkes, 2005; Ricciardelli, 2015). Accounts of violent encounters varied considerably with some participants recalling isolated events such as gang-related attacks in the street while others recalled violent disciplinary behaviours from teachers. A small minority described routine and

repeated violence in childhood as well as extreme but normalised violent acts planned and perpetrated in prison. Violent events influenced the lives of participants to varying degrees, shaping gender subjectivities and supporting entry into criminal trajectories.

Participants' descriptions of violent behaviours are understood within a frame of gender performativity, where many talked about aggression and tough masculinities being used to fit into hierarchies in school, on the street and in prison. In the school space, these practices were dialogically opposed to the 'ideal' or 'acceptable' practices associated with the cultural demands of compliance and conformity. Violent performances reinforced 'impossible' learners' identities and also supported hegemonic masculine identities in diverse spaces including the street. These spaces engendered a disinvestment in education and performing identities connected to "laddishness", disruptiveness, violent physicality and heterosexual promiscuity (Francis, 2009; C. Jackson, 2006; C. Jackson & Dempster, 2009). For some, engaging in violence in school and on the street led to exclusion, school failure or both, and eventually criminal pathways involving gangs and drugs.

Insights on everyday prison violence revolved around the themes of exclusion, hierarchy and negotiating vulnerability. Some participants, mostly those who were embroiled in cycles of offending, were careful to position themselves in roles that distanced them from vulnerability and they recounted witnessing or taking part in violent events connected to educational spaces. Some described breaking up fights and positioning themselves in 'hero/protector' roles, while others described performing roles such as being debt collectors which involved the use of violence, as well as collective violent practices towards vulnerable or subordinate prisoners such as sex offenders. The most violent and prolific offenders in the group had experienced constrained educational capabilities and violence in the family home. Their reputations as 'tough men' appeared to be important to them. Although these participants talked about their traumatic experiences in childhood, others who did not experience violent abuse also performed violence as a means of constructing their masculine identities. I therefore argue that motivation for violence can serve as a social performance, rather than only as a response to trauma (Messerschmidt, 2004).

Participants' gender performativity and violent practices were often relational in nature. Prison leavers demonstrated often contradictory feelings of aggression

and care towards younger prisoners; at times during interview participants expressed fantasies about violent altercations with subordinate men, before almost immediately pledging their support and guidance to them (Gooch, 2019; Jewkes, 2005).

Fragmented subjectivities and fragile identities were most evident in conversations surrounding this imagined violence towards others, and participants struggled to form a coherent narrative on motivations for violence, often towards younger men. I suggest that my role as a female listener in the interview space influenced participants' incoherent narratives. The body played an important role in the forming of violent subjectivities and I propose that masculine signifiers "stuck" to bodies through discursive violent practices in the retelling of violent events during the interviews (Berggren, 2014). This enabled the most violent men in the cohort to shore up tough and heteronormative masculine identities. However, narratives became incoherent as failing bodies and minds – due to years of manual labour, violence, unsupported mental health issues and the general course of ageing – undermined previous 'hardman' identities. Bodies are moulded by hegemonic scripts that shape gender performativity through violent practices, however, these subjectivities are time-bound and dependent on the unstoppable discourses of age and temporality. 'Sticky' signifiers can become unstuck, and the 'mask' of masculinity (de Viggiani, 2012) is dropped, often involuntarily. I suggest that feminist poststructuralist frames offer a unique and important view on how bodies and performativity are central to understanding prison leavers' contested and complex relationship with violence, especially when 'tough man' identities no longer match ageing and failing bodies and minds (Gadd, 2003). 'Impossible learner' identities are reinforced as the entrenchment of a tough masculinity moves participants further away from education and towards reoffending.

Education and Desistance: Re-shaping Gender and Learner Subjectivity in the Community

The final research question examines the role of gender and education in the desistance journeys of adult male prison leavers. This study is the first (to the knowledge of the researcher) to recognise the importance of the relationship between education and gender in the lives of formerly imprisoned men in the community following their release. Insights on the intersection of education and gender support the literature which suggests that desistance is a deeply gendered

process (Carlsson, 2013; Giordano et al., 2002). One participant, for example, framed the lack of post-prison support as a gendered issue and suggested that men who are entangled in a vicious cycle of imprisonment, homelessness and drug use are not seen as vulnerable, and therefore cannot move forward as the support does not exist for them. The participants' narratives stressed the importance of material (dis)advantage after prison and suggested a lack of housing and support posed some of the main barriers to re-engaging with education. Those who were able to live with, and be supported by, family were in a fortunate position with regard to re-engagement with education and reshaping their identities compared to those who were estranged from family and living in APs. Another participant termed the time needed to convalesce after imprisonment as the "freedom to grow", stressing the importance of being given the space to reforge one's identity in a supportive environment. The insights from this study demonstrate how the shaping of identity after imprisonment is implicated in the gendered roles and educational capabilities that are either expanded or constrained throughout participants' lives.

Participants who had experienced elements of the STPP in schooling, identified as 'impossible learners', navigated two distinct paths following their release from prison. One group moved away from criminality and embraced education in diverse ways. The other group appeared stuck in cycles of offending and performed harmful gender subjectivities in their lives after prison and also in the space of the interview. The first group showed strong investments in their children's education thereby interrupting the STPP for future generations. By investing in their children's education through advocacy in the school space, especially in relation to support for LDDs, as well as investing in their children's educational interests and achievements, participants supported an alternative future for their children. Heteronormative masculine subjectivity was upheld for this group by engaging in alternative masculine signifiers such as fatherhood, intellectualism and professionalism. Participants described transformative experiences represented by re-engaging with education and pursuing HE courses, and also by developing as professionals in ex-offender organisations. Turning points in desistance journeys were apparent when participants began to better understand their own personal struggles, including their difficulties with schooling, LDDs, neurodiversity, and mental health issues. The development of capabilities in and through education catalyses a shift in gender subjectivity manifested by moving away from toughness and addiction towards non-

offender identities. These changed identities are realised through alternative spaces of HE and work, and importantly are constructed through embracing vulnerability rather than suppressing it. These insights contribute to the literature on the gendered processes of desistance and how alternative non-offender trajectories are realised through educational processes and identities.

The other group of ‘impossible learners’, however, remain Othered and excluded for a multitude of reasons. Participants from this group continue to experience structural, physical and mental barriers to building fulfilling, flourishing lives. Often their living conditions, health problems and unmet needs relating to LDDs lead to the perpetuation of their difficulties which manifest in various ways including exclusion, isolation and reoffending. After decades of violent crime, drug addiction and supply, interspersed with periods of manual labour, upholding identities connected to toughness, violence and masculinised labour become more difficult and for some impossible. As a consequence, they become further excluded from the community and educational opportunities. Participants describe tensions with other prison leavers following their release, and through a consideration of relational masculinities, my analysis demonstrates how many became ‘stuck’ in harmful cycles of violence and offending. Struggling to enact their agency or engage in processes of self-reflection and building on community networks to move forward, the gendered implications of a failure to desist are highlighted through participants’ stories. Importantly, without insight, support or understanding of their LDDs and mental health issues, entrenched gendered behaviours remain unaltered, rendering the desistance process fragile and less likely to succeed for this excluded and Othered group. Further parallels can be drawn with the literature pertaining to overcoming addiction after prison and the importance of community engagement in moving forward on re-entry to society (Best et. al, 2024).

Beyond Masculinities: Feminist Theories, Methodologies and Praxis

This study has used a complex, interdisciplinary framework which has drawn on insights from a range of theorists and moved beyond masculinities theory to explore the phenomenon of gender and justice. By incorporating feminist poststructuralist analysis (Butler, 1990, 2004, 2011) and intersectionality theory, I have offered a unique frame within which to understand the gendered and educational experiences in prison leavers’ lives. The former theory dominates the

crime and gender literature (Maguire, 2021), whilst the latter is seldom used (Collier, 1998). Masculinities theory's appeal is in its centring of the hierarchical nature of institutions and relations amongst men, whilst offering insights into how structural disadvantage features in inequalities and the "patriarchal dividend" (R. Connell, 2005, p. 79) – men's power and advantage over women. Critiques of masculinities theory, as discussed in Chapter Three, suggests that Connell's theory has led to static typologies of how men and women behave and are tied to sexed bodies. This has resulted in a lack of scrutiny of subjectivities and instead a reification of gendered categories and typologies (Beasley, 2015; Berggren, 2014).

Poststructuralist feminist analysis, on the other hand, centres the construction of subjectivity and suggests that a close examination of the instability of identity should be undertaken to better understand gendered phenomena, especially through an analysis of discourse, discursive practices and performativity (Butler, 2004; Collier, 1998; Davies, 2006; McKinlay, 2010). I have applied theoretical insights, used by gender and educational theorist (Youdell, 2006) to unpack the dominant discourses drawn upon by prison leavers in the retelling of their experiences and explored how identity proves unstable in relation to hierarchies, institutions, relations with others and performativity in educational spaces. Intersectional localities – social class, (dis)ability, race and age – are central to understanding key themes of educational dis-/re-engagement and the construction of gender subjectivity in often marginal spaces within institutions.

A further intersectional focus has exposed how those who experienced better educational opportunities in schooling used their skills, acumen and capabilities to their advantage in prison and post-release. Among those who struggled in schooling, some found ways to flourish and develop their capability sets despite difficult starts, whereas others remained entrenched in cycles of offending, and capabilities remained constrained. The intersection of age, (dis)ability, social class and race with gender subjectivity has surfaced complex gender intersections with educational practices, identities and capabilities. This interrogation has been achieved through employing feminist theories, methodologies and praxis, which has incorporated but also moved beyond masculinities frameworks.

Feminist poststructuralist analysis exposes the disjuncture in gender categories and shakes the criminological framing of the individualised and pathologised male offender (Collier, 1998). Situating analysis through an

intersectional frame locates the role and nature of structural (dis)advantage in the shaping of gender subjectivity. I suggest that masculinities theory is useful in analysing a number of key features of prison leavers experiences in closed and gendered institutions. However, the examination of subjectivities and the fragility of identities using poststructuralist analysis allows further layers of Othering to be deconstructed and understood. Exposing how participants used unique strategies to move forwards, and examining the experiences of those who become trapped in cycles of offending, this approach has offered a deeper layer of understanding of the complexity of the shaping and reshaping of gender subjectivity through their lives. I recommend future research draws upon the under-utilised lenses of intersectionality theory and poststructuralist feminist analysis used in this study, especially in relation to education. These lenses have proven to be productive in their exploratory power to surface and then scrutinise exclusion, stigma and disengagement in the narratives of men in the justice system.

Limitations to the Study

This section details a few limitations to this study. It was out of the scope of this study to focus on transitions out of education. This covers the period of when young people leave schooling and move onto employment, further education or for some, they are “NEET” – Not in Employment Education or Training (ONS, 2025). This is an important period of time in understanding how young people spend their time, especially in how they can become vulnerable to entering crime trajectories. Although this time period has been explored in this study as it was relevant to some of the participants’ narratives it has not been studied as a standalone period of time. For those who are excluded from school, this can be a time of isolation and boredom which can lead to criminal behaviours, and should be examined in future studies which aim to understand how educational disengagement features in an overall trajectory which moves away from education and towards offending.

Although the sample covered those who did and did not engage with education, and included people from diverse ethnicities, socio-economic groups, age and experiences of LDDs, some important groups were not represented in the sample. People from traveller communities have the highest expulsion rates from school and are consistently over-represented in the justice system. It is a limitation of

this study that the perspectives of this important group were not included. Future research should purposively sample this highly marginalised group. Additionally, transgender and homosexual groups did not feature in this study, and also account for a highly marginalised group whose educational experiences should be understood through a gendered lens. Lastly, as discussed in my methodology chapter, due to the constraints influenced by COVID-19, I was unable to speak to men currently serving sentences in prison. Any study which focuses on prison education should ideally speak with men who are in custody, and understand their experiences from the confines of the prison environment.

Although I have problematised my role as the researcher, and discussed the benefits of my positionality as having partial insider status as well as the role of my gender in the interviews, I do not reflect the social profile or share the same backgrounds of most of the participants in this study. In chapter nine, I discussed how one participant found engaging with those who do not have lived experience of the justice system as a barrier to his desistance journey, and feeling comfortable in social interactions. I suggest that those with experience of the pains of imprisonment could be better suited to carry out interviews with those who have been particularly disaffected by education. This would support rapport building in the interview space and could lead to further insights on key issues.

My white identity could also have been viewed as a barrier to rapport and disclosing feelings about sensitive issues on race. As the interviews were semi-structured, I designed the flow of the interview to be led by the participants and we talked about issues that were important to them. However, as a researcher with a white identity, it is possible that some of the participants from an ethnic minority did not feel comfortable enough to talk about racial issues or discrimination they had experienced. I suggest that questions which focus specifically on race could be useful in drawing out these important knowledge areas, and further discussion with participants on how they feel about talking about racial issues with a non-Black researcher. Although the sample included six people from ethnic minorities, only one openly talked about racial discrimination (without prompting). There is robust literature which evidences racial discrimination in every stage of the criminal justice system (C. Phillips & Bowling, B., 2017), so the chances that the other five participants did not experience racism are low, however they did not disclose these experiences to me.

Policy, Practice and Future research

Policymakers and prison education staff should take into account intersectional backgrounds and the gendered dynamics of the prison environment. Educational disengagement is a problem in prisons (Cara & Creese, 2019), yet there is little exploratory research directed towards understanding why many men in prison do not attend educational classes. Understanding the learner identities of prison leavers should be multi-dimensional and move beyond static and unhelpful deficit discourses of 'problem learners.' Focussing on 'fixing' skills deficits based on an assessment of present-day skills without an understanding of intersectional backgrounds, can feed into deficit discourses and top-down approaches. Policymakers would benefit from listening to the experiences of prison leavers to better understand their strategies in moving away from crime, and towards education. In this thesis I argue that positioning the intersection between gender and education as a central lens through which to interpret experiences will offer insights into how people in prison can 'do gender' better, and support flourishing and engaging with education, rather than persistent cycles of offending, violence and tough masculinities. I suggest further research is needed to understand the intersections of education and gender in prisons, and how the gendered practices of staff and leadership influence entrenched gendered practices. Intersectional lenses are useful in understanding multiple axes of (dis)advantage, and further research should explore dynamic and shifting relations between people within the institution of prison.

This study has demonstrated how educational spaces can offer adult male prison leavers alternative ways to reflect on their lives and subjectivities. By developing reflexivity on how gender is performed, especially on masculine norms on toughness, vulnerability and barriers to engaging in education at various points in their lives, some of the men in this study were able to change how they navigated the world. One example of this reflection was how two participants engaged with the assessment of their LDDs while in prison. Some critiques suggest that educational and/or psychological assessment can fuel the dehumanisation and categorisation of prisoners (Higgins, 2021). Due to the small sample size in this study, it is not

possible to claim generalisability, however, evidence from two participants demonstrates a positive outcome from psychological assessment. Participants who received a full psychological assessment whilst in a secure recovery unit described, for the first time in their lives, being able to understand the barriers they experienced in navigating learning and educational spaces. They felt validated and were able to move on from self-pathologisation (as ‘impossible learners’) and describe a new perspective on vulnerability which supported the beginning of a change in how they performed gender subjectivity, supporting them to flourish in the educational space. A recent examination by a House of Commons Select Committee appointed to look into the diagnosis of learning disorders in prisons has suggested that people who are flagged up in the current screening system should have access to a full psychological assessment (Education Committee, 2022a). In the narratives of the participants discussed, the full psychological assessment contributed towards desistance journeys and forging non-offender identities including embracing vulnerability rather than suppressing it. In this study I support the Committee’s recommendations and suggest that all prisoners who would benefit from better understanding their LDDs, especially those who have been screened in prison, should be supported to have a full assessment if they wish.

The findings of this study also suggest that some prison education procedures can be insensitive to the needs of some of the most disengaged people in prison, and some forms of bureaucracy can exclude those who struggle with education the most. For example, educational assessments are administered during the first 72 hours of imprisonment; this can be a precarious and turbulent time for all prisoners. Conducting assessments within this timeframe is likely to impact prisoners’ ability to participate meaningfully which may skew results and will disproportionately disadvantage those who have had challenging educational experiences in the past. This study questions whether this early period of imprisonment is really an opportune time to “test” men who have been away from education for many years, and struggled at school. I recommend more research into how diverse, and less draconian ways of assessing skills could be deployed, including making the initial assessment optional, and securing participation through interest-led classes. I also suggest that an ethnographic study of testing in prisons could chart and document the experiences of prisoners undertaking mandatory educational testing, and assess the impact on educational engagement.

This study has also demonstrated that an account of gender could impact pedagogies and types of curricula offered in prisons. Current educational provision in prisons is based on a vocational model and supports prisoners to secure blue-collar jobs following their release. I propose that the link between preparation for work in manual labour and reduced reoffending is less clear and more complex than some studies suggest.(Davis, 2013). The participants in this study who appeared to be ‘revolving-door’ offenders struggled with reoffending due to more complex, deep-seated issues that cannot be addressed by vocational training. Many participants had already been working in trades for years. The issues connected to reoffending were not related to unemployment alone and I suggest that support to reduce violent behaviours, mental health issues and LDDs should be prioritised.

Other participants, who historically also experienced violent behaviours described engaging in subjects like art and sociology, both during their custodial sentences and after prison, that helped them to navigate the pains of imprisonment and to move away from violent behaviours allowing them to begin to reforge non-offender identities. Those who engaged in art reported that this type of education supported them to manage mental health issues in the absence of treatment. Others who studied sociology reported understanding the inequalities they had experienced in their formative years within a wider societal context, and this triggered their curiosity for learning more about structural disadvantages and led to engaging with HE after release. In some cases, these insights motivated prison leavers to support their children with schooling and invest in their education thereby interrupting the STPP. This study suggests a move away from a vocational model of education towards investing in alternative types of education which support human flourishing and capability expansion (Nussbaum, 2011; Vaughan & Walker, 2012; Walker & Unterhalter, 2007). My analysis has revealed how sociology, art and interest-based classes support people in prison to reforge identities and develop the capabilities needed to realise the aims of desistance. As the participants in this study have demonstrated, these types of education open doors to different capability sets and a ‘pedagogy of the self’, where prison leavers are able to flourish and move on from disadvantage, rather than returning to the same lifestyles, locations, work and behaviour patterns that characterised their lives before prison.

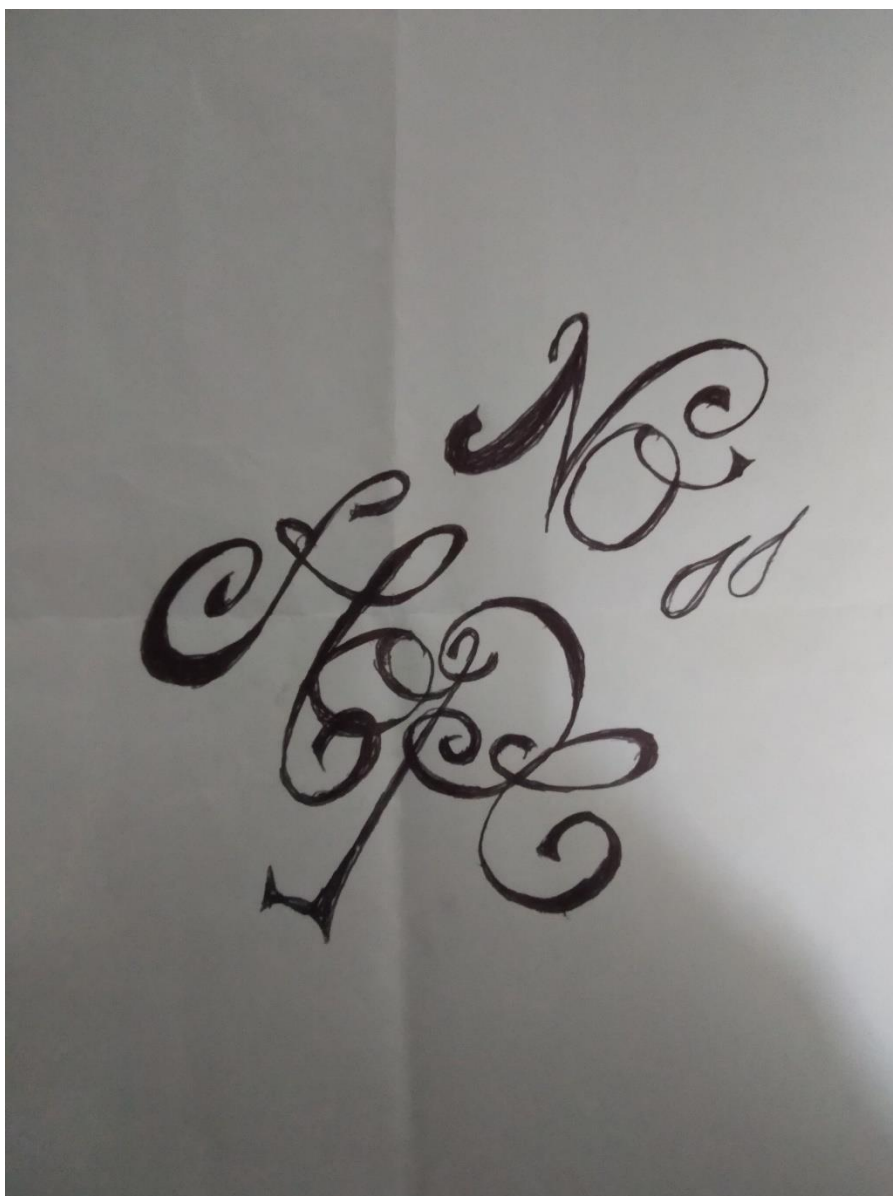
I suggest refocusing the policy agenda on the experiences of people in prison and understanding their strategies for moving towards desistance rather than

defaulting to the top-down approaches, typically associated with policymaking which inadvertently reify deficit discourses. Further research should actively work side-by-side with prisoners and prison leavers, drawing upon their life experiences and using their insights as a guiding tool to develop policy and practice. Reflecting a more progressive approach, I suggest further research could explore and document alternative pedagogies and curricula which are gender-sensitive, and propose that measures should focus on quality of life and flourishing after prison, rather than recidivism rates.

Final Reflections: Hope or no hope?

This thesis began by outlining the decline in prisoner well-being in English prisons drawing attention to the high self-harm and suicide rates which continue to be a feature of prison life today. During my time teaching in prisons, I met many men who were devoid of hope and had given up on living a fulfilling life, and it was these encounters that inspired me to begin this PhD project.

A person who stands out in my memory during my time teaching in prisons was a young man named 'Ricky'. The first impression of Ricky was the embodiment of hegemonic masculinity; he had visible scars, an aggressive stance, 'teardrop' tattoos and a lackadaisical attitude in lessons. After getting to know him, I discovered a sensitive, intelligent person who was a gifted graffiti artist. He was also abusing drugs on the wings, and at the age of 22, had already lost the will to change. On my last teaching day with him, he said his goodbyes, and left the following on my desk:



People in prison have hope when they see light at the end of the tunnel (Liebling et. al, 2019). Many people in prison, including many of the men that I spoke to in this study, appear to have lost hope despite having so much to give and every potential to live a flourishing life away from crime, drugs and violence. Although this study has offered reflections on those who did re-engage with education and found a renewed sense of purpose in their lives, it is important to acknowledge that many, like Ricky, appeared stuck in entrenched cycles of violence, self-destruction and extreme vulnerability. We must continue to find ways to support re-engagement with quality education on the individuals' own terms, and engender a reshaping of practices, identities and gender subjectivities that will benefit their families, wider society and importantly, themselves.

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Appendix A: Educational Journeys: Experiences of school and prison education – Information sheet

About me

My name is Angelique Mulholland, and I am inviting you to take part in my research project, “Educational journeys: experiences of school and prison education”. I am a Doctoral student researcher from the Institute of Education, University College London’s Education and Society department.

About the project

I’m interested in your experiences of education, including your memories of school, engagement with prison education and whether you have plans to continue education in the community today. I’m interested in your experiences with education throughout your life and what education means to you today. The main aim of my project is to understand better what leads a person who has experienced prison to engage with education, and what stops them.

Below are a few common questions about the project. If you would like more information, please don’t hesitate to write to me or ask for me at the education department, and I will explain the research project in more detail and answer your questions as best I can.

Questions

Why am I being invited to take part?

I am hoping to speak with 20 adult men who have experienced prison in the past. Your key worker has recommended you for the interviews and that your experiences may offer insights on education and how it can be improved.

What will happen if I choose to take part?

I hope to have at least two interviews/conversations with you which will last approximately 45 minutes – 1 hour. If you would like to talk to me more about your experiences, then we can arrange further times to meet. Our conversations will be recorded, but what you decide to tell me is confidential and will not be shared with any type of outside agency including probation services. The only time this doesn’t apply, is if I feel your safety, or someone else’s safety, is at risk (see consent form).

Will I be paid for the interviews?

Yes. You will be paid £20 for one hour interview. If you complete two interviews with me, you will receive £40. On completion of both interviews, your key worker will give you the money.

Will anyone know I have been involved?

Your key worker will know. This is to ensure safeguarding checks for your wellbeing throughout the research process. You will be given a pseudonym (an alternative name) and your personal information will not be shared with anyone. On publication of the research, your story will be anonymous, and your identity protected.

Could there be problems for me if I take part?

There are no foreseeable problems and there are no negative repercussions. However, if you feel uncomfortable at any point in the process, you can withdraw without giving a reason.

What will happen to the results of the research?

On completion of the research project, my thesis will be published in paper form and will be stored at the UCL IOE library. It will be accessible online via UCL discovery and academic articles may be published using data from this project.

Do I have to take part?

It is entirely up to you whether you choose to take part. I hope that if you do choose to be involved, then you will find it a valuable experience.

Data Protection Privacy Notice

Personal data is collected for example on your age and ethnicity; however, you will be given a pseudonym to protect your identity. All data is kept confidential.

If you would like further information, I can provide you with UCL's full guidance on data privacy for research purposes.

Contact me

If you would like to be involved in my research project, please get in touch with me at a.mulholland.14@ucl.ac.uk and we can discuss any further questions you may have.

Appendix B: Doctoral Student Ethics Application Form

Anyone conducting research under the auspices of the Institute of Education (staff, students or visitors) where the research involves human participants or the use of data collected from human participants, is required to gain ethical approval before starting. This includes preliminary and pilot studies. Please answer all relevant questions in simple terms that can be understood by a lay person and note that your form may be returned if incomplete.

Registering your study with the UCL Data Protection Officer as part of the UCL Research Ethics Review Process

If you are proposing to collect personal data i.e. data from which a living individual can be identified **you must be registered with the UCL Data Protection Office before you submit your ethics application for review.** To do this, email the complete ethics form to the [UCL Data Protection Office](#). Once your registration number is received, add it to the form* and submit it to your supervisor for approval. If the Data Protection Office advises you to make changes to the way in which you propose to collect and store the data this should be reflected in your ethics application form.

Please note that the completion of the [UCL GDPR online training](#) is mandatory for all PhD students.

Section 1 – Project details

- a. Project title: **An exploration of the gendered subjectivities and educational capabilities of adult men in English prisons**
- b. Student name and ID number (e.g. ABC12345678): Angelique Mulholland
MUL14126144
- c. ***UCL Data Protection Registration Number: Z6364106/2021/11/01 social research**
 - a. Date Issued: [01/11/2021](#)
- d. Supervisor/Personal Tutor: Professor Jenny Parkes/ Dr. Rosie Peppin-Vaughan
- e. Department: Education, Practice and Society (CEID)
- f. Course category (Tick one):

PhD	☒
EdD	☐
DEdPsy	☐
- g. **If applicable**, state who the funder is and if funding has been confirmed.
- h. Intended research start date: 01/12/2021
- i. Intended research end date: 01/05/2022
- j. Country fieldwork will be conducted in: England
- k. If research to be conducted abroad please check the [Foreign and Commonwealth Office \(FCO\)](#) and submit a completed travel risk assessment

form (see guidelines). If the FCO advice is against travel this will be required before ethical approval can be granted: [UCL travel advice webpage](#)

- I. Has this project been considered by another (external) Research Ethics Committee?

Yes ☐

External Committee Name:

Date of Approval:

No ☒ **go to Section 2**

If yes:

- Submit a copy of the approval letter with this application.
- Proceed to Section 10 Attachments.

Note: Ensure that you check the guidelines carefully as research with some participants will require ethical approval from a different ethics committee such as the [National Research Ethics Service](#) (NRES) or [Social Care Research Ethics Committee](#) (SCREC). In addition, if your research is based in another institution then you may be required to apply to their research ethics committee.

Section 2 - Research methods summary (tick all that apply)

☒ Interviews

☐ Focus Groups

☐ Questionnaires

☐ Action Research

☐ Observation

☒ Literature Review

☐ Controlled trial/other intervention study

☐ Use of personal records

☐ Systematic review – **if only method used go to Section 5**

☐ Secondary data analysis – **if secondary analysis used go to Section 6**

☐ Advisory/consultation/collaborative groups

☐ Other, give details:

Please provide an overview of the project, focusing on your methodology. This should include some or all of the following: purpose of the research, aims, main research questions, research design, participants, sampling, data collection (including justifications for methods chosen and description of topics/questions to be asked), reporting and dissemination. Please focus on your methodology; the theory, policy, or literary background of your work can be provided in an attached document (i.e. a full research proposal or case for support document). *Minimum 150 words required.*

Background and purpose of research

The purpose of my qualitative research project is to investigate the histories, practices, beliefs and identities of individuals who both engage and refuse to engage in prison education in adult male prisons, paying particular attention to the subjective, emotional dynamics of their experiences.

Participation rates in prison educational courses remain consistently low across prison estates in England, yet little is known about educationally disengaged prisoners. This is an unusual gap in the literature as emergent studies have suggested that one of the outcomes of prison education can be a higher likelihood of employment on release and a reduction in reoffending (MoJ, 2017). My project focuses on a number of key issues which may offer insight into educational dis/re-engagement of men in adult prisons. This includes an exploration and analysis of prisoners' poor educational experiences of schooling; learning disabilities/difficulties; the role of prison violence and the peer dynamic; and how class, race but especially gender shapes learner identities and capabilities in the prison environment.

This line of enquiry stems from my experience as a prison educator in adult male prisons and being afforded a closer look at the struggles prison learners experience in the process of educational dis/re-engagement. I began teaching in prisons in 2016 after prison-wide staff cuts and years of austerity had led to a dramatic increase in violence, disaffection (Ismail, 2020) and some of the highest assault and self-harm rates since records began (MoJ, 2020). This experience led me to think more deeply about the relationship between prisoners' educational backgrounds and fragile learner identities, present-day disengagement and extreme behaviours described in the literature as practices connected to "prison masculinities" (Sabo et al., 2001). My focus has been on how these areas connect, rather than treating them as separate social phenomenon.

This study hopes to shed light on prison learners' educational journeys – both past and present, for those who are disengaged with education but also those who are engaged. Being afforded a closer look at the struggles prison learners experience in the process of educational dis/re-engagement, I aim to understand how evolving learner identities impact capabilities in and through education as well as exploring

the solutions and barriers to educational disengagement, most notably the gendered discursive practices of prison and prison education.

Research aims and questions

I will be using a multidisciplinary framework which captures the complexity of the research problem. Using a combined framework of the Capability Approach, Feminist Poststructuralism and Masculinities theory, this study aims to explore the educational journeys of adult men in English prisons, both those moving towards and away from prison education. The key research aims are informed by the literature review and guided by the theoretical ideas derived from the framework above. They are as follows:

Research aims:

- Explore the subjective, emotional experiences of adult male prisoners' educational journeys from schooling to present day dis/re-engagement
- Understand the role of past educational experiences in present day disengagement
- Understand the role of learning difficulties and disabilities in present day disengagement
- Ascertain the impact of the gendered carceral environment, and whether practices connected to prison masculinities – such as violence and bullying – play a role in present day dis-engagement
- Identify the key turning points in the educational journeys of learners who have re-engaged with education in prison, exploring especially the subjective, emotional experiences of their journeys
- Explore the capabilities produced through the discursive practices of prison education and the gendered implications for prison pedagogy

Research Questions

Overarching research question

What is the relationship between gendered subjectivity and the educational capabilities of adult male learners in English prisons?

Sub-research questions

1. How do the educational trajectories and learner identities of men who have committed crime impact on their engagement with education in prison?
2. How do the beliefs, practices and identities relating to prison masculinities influence the educational engagement of men in prison who have a history of violence and/or disaffection with education?
3. How do the gendered discursive practices of prison education influence the gendered capabilities of prison learners?
4. What are the implications of a more developed understanding of the interplay between gendered subjectivity and the discursive practices of prison education, and how can this knowledge inform prison pedagogies to enhance capabilities?

Methodology

My research project is purposefully qualitative, designed to capture the educational experiences of adult male prisoners. Although there is a dearth on educational disengagement in prison, I will begin with a review of the literature on prison learners interrupted educational pasts, focussing on the experiences of learning disability/difficulties, exclusion and links with future criminal trajectories. Following this, I will review the literature on prison education and prison masculinities, paying close attention to how the areas connect, rather than treating them as separate social phenomenon.

Building on areas identified in the literature and captured in my research aims and questions above, my main method of data collection is to conduct a series of narrative interviews with 20 prisoners, ideally an equal split between both educationally disengaged and engaged prison learners. In these interviews, I will explore their educational journeys to date and how learner identities are shaped by past experiences, gendered beliefs and practices as well as the extent to which the gendered dynamics of prison pedagogies influence the development of prosocial identities and capabilities.

Sampling and interviews

As explained above, the sample will consist of 20 adult male prisoners both engaged and disengaged with education. Ideally, I hope to interview individuals with a mix of ethnic/raced backgrounds. Biographical details of prisoners' backgrounds will add intersectional understandings to prisoners' behaviours and belief systems towards education. I will use a method of co-production with current prison learners to recruit prisoners through designing a poster for my project. Secondly, I will also work with

the prison education department to select prisoners based on the criteria pertaining to the research aims.

With each participant, I will conduct a series of interviews (at least two) in a quiet area of the prison, away from other prisoners. In the first interview, I will begin with warm up questions, and will use open ended questions to encourage the interviewee to tell me about their lives and biographical events which are meaningful to them. I will use an interview schedule which will detail prompts and questions organised around the key themes of this project; chiefly – memories of school, views on prison education and social life in prison. I will probe throughout on gender dimensions as experiences may feature throughout their lives. I aim to delve deeper on key points reflected on by the interviewee by using probing techniques to elicit further information on experiences and events. In the second interview, I hope to build upon conversations in the first interview and seek clarification on key reflections as well as offering an opportunity to discuss further themes that are of interest to them. Each interview should last between 30 minutes and 1 hour.

The opportunity for additional interviews will give interviewees a space in which to discuss issues touched upon in previous conversations and discuss further topics which they feel are important to them. Evans and Wallace (2008) argue that some prisoners may lack emotional and verbal fluency and support may be needed at certain points in the interview as well as time in order to gather their thoughts and reflections. As a former prison teacher, I concur that some prisoners will need support to open up as well as to build rapport and trust throughout the interviews. This is why a series of flexible interviews is more appropriate than one-off conversations. I am hoping to spend time 3-4 months in the field, building up relationships with participants and earning trust, however I remain flexible to the wider pressures on the prison system and recognise the needs of the regime and the safety of everyone takes precedence over my research project. Interviews with staff can also be completed remotely if more conducive and convenient.

Proposed site

I am hoping to conduct my fieldwork at HMP Guys Marsh. This prison is a category C prison that holds 278 adult male prisoners and is also situated close to my residence in Somerset. Category C prisons are training and resettlement prisons where the majority of the prison population are serving their sentences and are less transient than remand prisoners mostly held in category B prisons. A stable prison population will offer the opportunity to capture stories of men who have settled into their sentences and therefore have had the chance to engage with education over a period of time.

Category C and D prisons offer prisoners the opportunity to develop their own skills so they can find work and resettle back into the community on release. HMP Guys

Marsh has numerous work-based training sites offering courses on bricklaying, industrial cleaning, laundry and farm estates. English and Numeracy aims to be embedded into vocational courses but not always offered as discrete lessons as the uptake has been poor amongst the prison population for some time. I hope to talk with prisoners who have experienced disaffection; their relationship with education and their feelings about the opportunities to re-engage in light of the gendered and psychosocial demands of prison life.

Covid19 implications

The recent Covid19 pandemic has disrupted prison life significantly and the proposed methods of this study have to be planned in line with the wider implications of the pandemic, including restrictions on primary research in prisons. As modern-day prisons in England are overcrowded institutions with a higher rate of health inequalities compared to the rest of the country (Ginn, 2013) they continue to be vulnerable to outbreaks, even when transmission of the virus is low in the community (Grierson, 2021). As a consequence, an indeterminate moratorium was placed on prison research applications for external candidates. I therefore hope to begin my research at HMP Guys Marsh in Spring 2022 when prisoners and staff will be vaccinated and hopefully operating a non-exceptional regime. If, however in-prison research poses a safety risk at time of application, the interviews discussed above will be requested in an online capacity to ensure the safety of all and the researcher will remain cognisant of the unique pressures the prison services faces in light of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Data analysis

After gaining informed consent from all participants, the narrative interviews will be recorded using a security cleared tape-recording device – either one that has security clearance, or one offered by the prison. Interviews will then be transcribed away from prison premises. Thematic and discourse analysis will be used to identify key themes in the data which I hope will offer new insight into the educational experiences of prisoners and present day re/dis-engagement.

Section 3 – research Participants (tick all that apply)

- ☐ Early years/pre-school
- ☐ Ages 5-11
- ☐ Ages 12-16

- ☐ Young people aged 17-18
- ☒ Adults please specify below
- ☐ Unknown – specify below
- ☐ No participants

- Adult male prisoners who are able to give informed consent to take part in the research project.

- Prison education staff.

Note: Ensure that you check the guidelines carefully as research with some participants will require ethical approval from a different ethics committee such as the [National Research Ethics Service](#) (NRES) or [Social Care Research Ethics Committee](#) (SCREC).

Section 4 - Security-sensitive material (only complete if applicable)

Security sensitive research includes: commissioned by the military; commissioned under an EU security call; involves the acquisition of security clearances; concerns terrorist or extreme groups.

- a. Will your project consider or encounter security-sensitive material?
Yes* ☐ No ☒
- b. Will you be visiting websites associated with extreme or terrorist organisations?
Yes* ☐ No ☒
- c. Will you be storing or transmitting any materials that could be interpreted as promoting or endorsing terrorist acts?
Yes* ☐ No ☒

* Give further details in **Section 8 Ethical Issues** ☐

Section 5 – Systematic reviews of research (only complete if applicable)

- a. Will you be collecting any new data from participants?
Yes* ☐ No ☐

- b. Will you be analysing any secondary data?

Yes* ☐ No ☐

* Give further details in **Section 8 Ethical Issues** ☐

*If your methods do not involve engagement with participants (e.g. systematic review, literature review) **and** if you have answered **No** to both questions, please go to **Section 8 Attachments**.*

Section 6 - Secondary data analysis (only complete if applicable)

- a. Name of dataset/s:
b. Owner of dataset/s:
c. Are the data in the public domain?

Yes ☐ No ☐

If no, do you have the owner's permission/license?

Yes ☐ No* ☐

- d. Are the data special category personal data (i.e. personal data revealing racial or ethnic origin, political opinions, religious or philosophical beliefs, or trade union membership, and the processing of genetic data, biometric data for the purpose of uniquely identifying a natural person, data concerning health or data concerning a natural person's sex life or sexual orientation)?

Yes* ☐ No ☐

- e. Will you be conducting analysis within the remit it was originally collected for?

Yes ☐ No* ☐

- f. **If no**, was consent gained from participants for subsequent/future analysis?

Yes ☐ No* ☐

- g. **If no**, was data collected prior to ethics approval process?

Yes ☐ No* ☐

* Give further details in **Section 8 Ethical Issues** ☐

*If secondary analysis is only method used **and** no answers with asterisks are ticked, go to **Section 9 Attachments**.*

Section 7 – Data Storage and Security

Please ensure that you include all hard and electronic data when completing this section.

a. Data subjects - Who will the data be collected from?

- 20 x Adult male prisoners who are serving their sentences at HMPPS Guys Marsh. Ideally, an equal split between those who are engaged and disengaged from prison education.
- Prison education staff including education managers, teachers from diverse disciplines, outreach tutors and assessment co-ordinators.

b. What data will be collected? Please provide details of the type of personal data to be collected

- Demographic/personal data will be collected on participants, such as their ethnicity and age. This is necessary as intersectional understandings are important to flesh out the diversity of experiences and attitudes towards education; an individual's ethnic, cultural and social orientation is likely to have a bearing on this.

- Data will be collected on three main areas; participants memories of school, present-day feelings towards education and social life in prison. A 'light touch' approach will be used to illicit reflections of participants school days, paying attention to the subjective and emotional dynamics of these reflections and whether individuals feel their past has a bearing on their present day re/dis-engagement. If participants are not engaged in education and have no plans to engage, I will probe for clarifications why this is the case and seek to understand the maintenance of their educational disengagement whilst in prison. If prisoners are engaged in education, I will seek to understand their experiences of prison education and whether gender norms and practices have a bearing on the capabilities that are enhanced or limited.

- Education staff will be asked for their job title and if a prison teacher, which subject they teach. I will ascertain their views on educationally disengaged prisoners and the reasons why, in their experience, they refuse prison education. Additionally, I will explore their subjects with them and gain an understanding of how prosocial identities and gender capabilities are developed through pedagogies in their classrooms, especially around issues connected with vulnerability.

Is the data anonymised? Yes ☐ No* ☒

Do you plan to anonymise the data?

Yes* ☒ No ☐

Do you plan to use individual level data? Yes* ☒ No ☐

Do you plan to pseudonymise the data? Yes* ☒ No ☐

** Give further details in **Section 8 Ethical Issues***

- c. **Disclosure** – Who will the results of your project be disclosed to?

In the early stages of data analysis, raw data will only be shared with my supervisors Professor Jenny Parkes and Dr. Rosie Peppin Vaughan. On publication, my thesis will be available through the UCL library. I will archive the data in accordance with UCL guidelines.

Disclosure – Will personal data be disclosed as part of your project?

No. Prisoners and prison staffs' personal identities will be protected throughout the project. I will pseudonymise all names as soon as participants agree to take part so identities will be protected from the beginning. This means when data is shared with supervisors during fieldwork identities will be protected. The name of the prison will also be anonymised. See below for handling of personal data.

- d. **Data storage** – Please provide details on how and where the data will be stored i.e. UCL network, encrypted USB stick**, encrypted laptop** etc. Enter text

*** Advanced Encryption Standard 256 bit encryption which has been made a security standard within the NHS*

I will use a notebook and a recording device that has gained security clearance by the prison. I will take both home (by car) at the end of each day and they will be stored in a locked cabinet in my home. After the interviews have been transcribed, the digital versions will be erased. No materials pertaining to my fieldwork will be stored at the prison.

I will use the UCL network to store the transcribed interviews, notes, preliminary findings and evolving manuscript. Password protected files will be used to protect the data, in addition to my password protected laptop, which also be stored away at night. My laptop also has up to date anti-virus software/firewall.

- e. **Data Safe Haven (Identifiable Data Handling Solution)** – Will the personal identifiable data collected and processed as part of this research be stored in the UCL Data Safe Haven (mainly used by SLMS divisions, institutes and departments)?

Yes ☐ No ☒

- f. How long will the data and records be kept for and in what format?

In accordance with UCL record retention guidelines, data and records will be kept for 10 years in the UCL depository. Notebooks will be stored securely until the write up of my data and then shredded and destroyed.

Will personal data be processed or be sent outside the European Economic Area? (If yes, please confirm that there are adequate levels of protections in compliance with GDPR and state what these arrangements are)

No.

Will data be archived for use by other researchers? (If yes, please provide details.)

No, only my thesis will be stored in the UCL library.

- g. If personal data is used as part of your project, describe what measures you have in place to ensure that the data is only used for the research purpose e.g. pseudonymisation and short retention period of data’.

Personal data of participants will be collected once participants have agreed to be part of the study. First name, age and ethnic background will be collected. This will be recorded in a separate notebook. On the same day, the participant will be given a pseudonym and the original personal data will be destroyed. No personal data for any participants will leave prison premises.

All data in the final publication will be anonymised and as above, notebooks and raw data will be destroyed at the end of the PhD. Thesis and transcripts will be stored within the UCL depository for 10 years in accordance with UCL guidelines.

* Give further details in **Section 8 Ethical Issues** ☐

Section 8 – Ethical Issues

Please state clearly the ethical issues which may arise in the course of this research and how will they be addressed.

All issues that may apply should be addressed. Some examples are given below, further information can be found in the guidelines. *Minimum 150 words required.*

- Methods
- Sampling
- Recruitment
- Gatekeepers
- Informed consent
- Potentially vulnerable participants
- Safeguarding/child protection
- Sensitive topics
- International research
- Risks to participants and/or researchers
- Confidentiality/Anonymity
- Disclosures/limits to confidentiality
- Data storage and security both during and after the research (including transfer, sharing, encryption, protection)
- Reporting
- Dissemination and use of findings

Access, Methods, sampling and recruitment

In order to gain access to the prison site, I will need to apply to the National Research Committee at the Ministry of Justice. This involves a full application stating how my project aligns with MoJ's business objectives as well as COVID19 screening form and full risk assessment. I can apply for access once HMPPS Guys Marsh is at stage 1 in the COVID19 recovery process, it is currently at stage 2 as of 01/10/2021. Once access has been granted, HMPPS Guys Marsh will initiate my security clearance. Once the formalities have been handled, I will liaise with a point of contact (PoC) during my time at HMPPS Guys Marsh.

Once I have gained access, I propose to recruit 10 adult male prisoners who have not engaged or have had minimum engagement with education during their current or previous sentences, and 10 prison learners who have been able to engage in education. I will use an opt-in procedure and the participants will know they are free to leave the project, without reason, if they wish at any time.

In order to recruit interviewees, I will begin my fieldwork by employing methods of co-production and working with the prison education department and prison learners. Together, we will design a poster to gain attention for my project and the recruitment of engaged and disengaged learners for interviews. This will not only allow me to begin to get to know some of the prisoners but also to give potential interviewees agency in the research process. Each participant selected for interview will be discussed with prison staff and prison authorities and care will be taken to omit prisoners who are vulnerable or unable to give informed consent. This includes

prisoners who are under the supervision of an ACCT (supervised as deemed vulnerable to suicide).

Information sheets will be provided with the consent forms. I will frame the research project as an opportunity for prison learners and potential learners to give their feedback on the education systems they have experienced, what it has meant to them throughout their lives and how it can be improved. I will spend time talking with potential interviewees to build trust and assure them of confidentiality and anonymity. In accordance with HMPPS guidelines, I will not offer prisoners any incentives for taking part. I hope the motivation to continuing talking to me will be in the process of sharing their views and feeling their educational experiences matter.

If more prisoners wish to take part and I already have 20 participants, I will take time to speak with them and listen to their views. I will make it clear that they will not be part of the formal project, but I am still interested in what they have to say.

During the recruitment process, I will also make it clear to staff that no potential participant should feel pressured at any point to take part. If they wish to talk to me, it will be via an opt-in process with a clear informed consent procedure. Their wellbeing will be prioritised throughout the process, in line with HMPPS guidelines and my own ethical protocol.

Vulnerable participants and informed consent

Prisoners are considered a vulnerable group due their reduced liberty and autonomy as well as their deprived and often traumatic life experiences before prison. Additionally, many prisoners have ongoing drug addictions and experience bullying on the wings. In light of this, it is essential that provisions are put in place to ensure the safety and wellbeing of prisoners throughout the research process. Firstly, as stated above, prisoners who are experiencing poor mental health, substance abuse issues or are under an ACCT will be discounted from the project for their own well-being. I will work with prison education staff as well as prisoners' Personal officers (POs) to ensure each participant is able to take part in the interview and that the process is unlikely to cause any distress.

Before conducting each interview, I will ask the participant to read the consent form and sign to say they have understood it. The participant will be informed of the following:

- They can leave the project at any time
- The information they share will not be passed onto prison authorities, unless they disclose information which relates to the harm of either themselves or another person
- Their story will be anonymised, and they will be given a pseudonym to protect their identity

Some participants may have reduced levels of education and may struggle to read or understand the consent form. If this is the case, a support mentor will accompany them in the first interview and explain the consent form to them. If they are unable to write and sign their name, the mentor will be asked to sign on their behalf and witness their verbal informed consent.

Sensitive topics and safeguarding

The primary aim of my research is to understand educational journeys and how gendered practices, identities and beliefs feature in educational experiences. The interviews will therefore begin with a discussion about the participants' memories of school – although not the aim of the study, this may bring up painful memories from the past and their childhoods. Some prison researchers suggest that the qualitative research process can offer opportunities for prisoners to talk about their lives, often for the first time since entering prison (or perhaps their lives) and this can be a cathartic, positive process. Equally, talking about negative memories from the past can be unsettling and upsetting.

My main aim is to understand educational journeys and not to probe about difficult childhoods, however it is important to allow participants to talk about what is important to them. I will ensure that if participants become upset with a certain question or particular topic, I will ask them if they would rather move on and talk about something else. Participants will be supported in the research process, and I will also check on each prisoner a day after each interview, either in person or by liaising with the POs/wing officers. This is to ensure the participant's wellbeing and to ascertain whether they need additional support.

Participants will be informed at the beginning of the interview that if they disclose information which relates to crimes being committed in the prison, or outside of the prison before their sentence began, it will be reported to the relevant authorities. Similarly, if a participant relates information about harm to another prisoner, or I become worried about the prisoners' own wellbeing safety, then this will also be reported. This is a common protocol in prison and participants will be aware that this is a standard safeguarding procedure.

Risks to participants and/or researchers

As I have experience of working in challenging prison estates, I am aware of the importance of assessing risk – this can be the decision to enter a volatile wing or being alone with a prisoner who has a history of violence. Throughout the research process, I will ensure that my risk assessed research protocol is shared with prison management and that there is a mutual understanding of the safety measures in place to protect both myself and my participants.

As already stated above, care will be taken to exclude prisoners who are mentally unstable due to substance abuse or ongoing mental health problems. This reduces the risk of participants becoming unwell in the research process as it is anticipated that those selected will be able to take part without it affecting their wellbeing negatively. However, as already stated, there is potential for sensitive topics to emerge and for prisoners to feel distress. If this occurs, I will show sensitivity during the interview in ensuring participants know they can move on from a distressing subject as well as checking on their wellbeing in the days after the interview. I have experience of talking with prison learners who have at times opened up about difficult experiences in their lives. It is important to be sensitive to their feelings as well as to check in on how they are doing after talking about difficult memories.

In the unlikely event that a participant becomes angry, abusive or violent towards me, I will ensure that the room I am conducting interviews in has an emergency alarm and that I will conduct the interviews within arm's reach. It will also be detailed in the research protocol that before each interview I will locate the nearest duty prison officer and make my presence known. The relevant prison authorities will be consulted and the protocol will be agreed upon before interviews begin.

It is important that personal details of my life are not shared with participants to ensure my safety during and after the research. This is an important part of HMPPS protocol. As participants already know they are not allowed to ask personal questions, I will ensure that if any inappropriate questions are asked, I will immediately make it clear that I cannot answer them. If questions persist, I will report this to my point of contact.

Security sensitive data and confidentiality/anonymity

As stated above, I will need to acquire a security clearance in order to conduct fieldwork in prison. Although I will collect personal data from the participants, I do not need access to criminal record databases at any point in the project. The steps below will mitigate risk to personal details being compromised.

Participants personal data and the prison itself will be anonymised, and the prison site and the participants will be given pseudonyms. Personal data will be recorded in a separate notebook. As soon as the participant has agreed to be part of the project, they will be allocated a pseudonym and the personal data in the separate notebook will be destroyed. If participants talk about their crimes, and it is relevant to their narrative on their educational experiences, then distinguishing details will be omitted. Chances of disclosure to perpetrators victims will be extremely low, as the data will be anonymised, kept confidential and distinguishing features of stories changed. The participant will not be asked about the nature of their crime directly.

Further, personal data will be protected by being kept separate from field notes and destroyed once written up on my laptop at home. As stated earlier, all files will be

password protected and field notes will be safely stored in a locked cabinet. Once interviews are transcribed, audio will be deleted. No materials relating to my project will be left at the prison site.

Reporting, Dissemination and use of findings

Reporting in the first instance will be solely to my supervisors, Jenny Parkes and Rosie Peppin-Vaughan. Once my PhD VIVA has taken place, I will provide a three-page document of my findings for HMPPS Guys Marsh detailing my findings. Additionally, I hope to offer specific feedback to the education department on how educationally disengaged prisoners can be supported better in the process of re-engagement.

I will consult with the relevant prison authorities about whether the participants will be provided with feedback on the research study. Generally, researchers and former staff are not allowed to make any contact with serving prisoners once their work has ceased. This will be confirmed before interviews begin so I can manage expectations of participants.

Please confirm that the processing of the data is not likely to cause substantial damage or distress to an individual

Yes ☒

Section 9 – Attachments.

Please attach your information sheets and consent forms to your ethics application before requesting a Data Protection number from the UCL Data Protection office. Note that they will be unable to issue you the Data Protection number until all such documentation is received

- a. Information sheets, consent forms and other materials to be used to inform potential participants about the research (List attachments below)

Yes ☒ No ☐

[Information sheets](#)

[Consent forms](#)

[Topic guide](#)

- b. Approval letter from external Research Ethics Committee Yes ☐
- c. The proposal ('case for support') for the project Yes ☐
- d. Full risk assessment Yes ☒

Section 10 – Declaration

I confirm that to the best of my knowledge the information in this form is correct and that this is a full description of the ethical issues that may arise in the course of this project.

I have discussed the ethical issues relating to my research with my supervisor.

Yes ☒ No ☐

I have attended the appropriate ethics training provided by my course.

Yes ☒ No ☐

I confirm that to the best of my knowledge:

The above information is correct and that this is a full description of the ethics issues that may arise in the course of this project.

Name [Angelique Mulholland](#)

Date [29/10/2021](#)

Please submit your completed ethics forms to your supervisor for review.

Notes and references

Professional code of ethics

You should read and understand relevant ethics guidelines, for example:

[British Psychological Society](#) (2018) *Code of Ethics and Conduct*

Or

[British Educational Research Association](#) (2018) *Ethical Guidelines*

Or

[British Sociological Association](#) (2017) *Statement of Ethical Practice*

Please see the respective websites for these or later versions; direct links to the latest versions are available on the [Institute of Education Research Ethics website](#).

Disclosure and Barring Service checks

If you are planning to carry out research in regulated Education environments such as Schools, or if your research will bring you into contact with children and young people (under the age of 18), you will need to have a Disclosure and Barring Service (DBS) CHECK, before you start. The DBS was previously known as the Criminal Records

Bureau (CRB). If you do not already hold a current DBS check, and have not registered with the DBS update service, you will need to obtain one through at IOE.

Ensure that you apply for the DBS check in plenty of time as will take around 4 weeks, though can take longer depending on the circumstances.

Further references

Robson, Colin (2011). *Real world research: a resource for social scientists and practitioner researchers* (3rd edition). Oxford: Blackwell.

This text has a helpful section on ethical considerations.

Alderson, P. and Morrow, V. (2011) *The Ethics of Research with Children and Young People: A Practical Handbook*. London: Sage.

This text has useful suggestions if you are conducting research with children and young people.

Wiles, R. (2013) *What are Qualitative Research Ethics?* Bloomsbury.

A useful and short text covering areas including informed consent, approaches to research ethics including examples of ethical dilemmas.

Departmental Use

If a project raises particularly challenging ethics issues, or a more detailed review would be appropriate, the supervisor must refer the application to the Research Development Administrator via email so that it can be submitted to the IOE Research Ethics Committee for consideration. A departmental research ethics coordinator or representative can advise you, either to support your review process, or help decide whether an application should be referred to the REC. If unsure please refer to the guidelines explaining when to refer the ethics application to the IOE Research Ethics Committee, posted on the committee's website.

Student name:

Student department:

Course:

Project Title:

Reviewer 1

Supervisor/first reviewer name: Tejendra Pherali

Do you foresee any ethical difficulties with this research?

I think Angelique has carefully considered ethical dilemmas and potential risks relating to the proposed study and particularly, around collecting research data in a prison setting. She has put in place appropriate measures to navigate ethical challenges and sensitivities. As an educational professional with a longstanding experience of working inside the prison and guided by her two experienced supervisors at IOE, I believe Angelique will conduct this study with high ethical standards. So, I do not see any ethical difficulties with this research.

Supervisor/first reviewer signature

Date: 29/11/2021

Reviewer 2

Second reviewer name: Jenny Parkes

Do you foresee any ethical difficulties with this research?

No, Angelique has addressed potential ethical challenges well, and has additionally completed a risk assessment, and permissions via the MoJ are underway.

Second reviewer signature:

Date: 30/11/2021

Decision on behalf of reviewers

Approved ☒

Approved subject to the following additional measures ☐

Not approved for the reasons given below ☐

Referred to the REC for review ☐

Points to be noted by other reviewers and in report to REC:

Comments from reviewers for the applicant:

Once it is approved by both reviewers, students should submit their ethics application form to the Centre for Doctoral Education team:
IOE.CDE@ucl.ac.uk.

Appendix C: Ethics review – Amendments to existing project Angelique Mulholland

**Please read document in conjunction with original ethics reviews, signed off
on 30/11/2021**

Key changes

Site

My planned research site was originally a category B male prison, HMPPS Guys Marsh. However, due to the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, HMPPS has issued a new moratorium on external research projects, and it is increasingly unlikely that access to my proposed site to carry out research during my funding period is possible. I have therefore made the difficult decision, in liaison with my supervisory team, to change fieldwork sites.

I will be conducting interviews with prison leavers in the community, working in partnership with national ex-offender support organisation **** and the ****. I will be visiting **** various site premises to interview ten prison leavers about their educational experiences. The sites are resettlement accommodation for prison leavers newly released from prison who are able to access the complex support needed to reintegrate into the community after serving their prison sentences. The exact location of the sites are yet to be confirmed, but it is likely they will be located in South Wales and London. **** supports the education of people in prison and prison leavers. They are supporting facilitation of interviews with prison leavers who are living independently in the community.

As some of the participants will be on probation (although some will not), it is necessary to obtain further clearance from HMPPS, which I am in the process of completing.

Research design

My research design will stay largely the same with a few small changes, detailed below. My fieldwork will still involve two interviews with approximately 20 men, who will be invited to opt into the study via a support organisation, ****, and also through academic networks. The interviews will involve questions about their educational experiences and offer them a safe space to talk about the issues that matter to them,

especially on how educational systems and structures have affected them during their lives.

Research questions

The research questions remain largely unchanged, with minor edits to reflect the change in setting and participant.

The overarching research question remains unchanged apart from a reflection of the new participant profile:

What is the relationship between gendered subjectivity and the educational capabilities of adult male prison leavers?

The sub-research questions have changed to reflect the nature of prison leavers experience and include their current educational endeavours and its relation to revolving door incarceration.

How do the educational trajectories and evolving learner identities of men who have committed crime impact on their engagement with education in prison and learning in the community on release?

How do the beliefs, practices and identities relating to gender subjectivity influence the educational engagement of prison leavers who have a history of disaffection with education?

How does continuing constraint on educational capabilities combined with a performance of gender subjectivity contribute to struggles with re-entry and ongoing revolving door incarceration?

Sample profile and recruitment

The sample and profile of participants remains unchanged. I will be interviewing men of diverse ages, ethnicities and with a range of abilities who have all experienced time in prison. This profile will enable me to capture the diversity of educational experiences and support an understanding of gender subjectivity in varied contexts. Recruitment of interviewees will be organised in two ways: with NACRO, my contact point will liaise with the house managers and I will play a smaller role in recruitment. I will also be advising the contact manager on the sample profile on whom would be ideal to recruit for the study. Recruitment via personal and academic contacts will involve liaising directly with contacts in my personal and academic circles who have experienced prison and are now in the community.

Ethical considerations

People leaving prison continue to be regarded as vulnerable and safeguarding their wellbeing throughout the research process will need to be carefully considered. The

safeguarding processes proposed in the original ethics review remain unchanged. Well-being checks, support throughout interview process, processes around informed consent, anonymity/confidentiality processes remain the same. The only change is that I will be liaising with their key worker and house manager, instead of their personal prison officer. In the case of participants with a low level of literacy, I will work with their key workers to ensure that the participants fully understand the process and that they can opt out at any point.

In the case of participants who I am meeting through NACRO, all interviews will take place in the housing service where they reside and are being supported. I will travel to them and the house manager will organise a quiet room where we can talk uninterrupted. In the unlikely event of a participant posing challenging behaviour, the key worker/housing manager will be on site throughout the interviews in case of any problems and to ensure my safety should any unforeseen challenges arise. Well-being checks after the interviews will be via the key worker or housing managers.

In the case of participants who am I meeting through PET and my academic contacts, all of these participants live independently in the community. The meeting will take place in a neutral location e.g. cafe. If anything, upsetting comes up during the interview, or the participant seems distressed, I will follow up with them directly a few days after the interview to check on how they are doing.

Incentives

In consultation with the DTP, I have secured £40 for each participant for 2 x 1-hour interviews. The vouchers serve to compensate the participants for their time and travel. Although not all the participants will be travelling, as I will be visiting them, the equal payment is ensuring fairness in the research process, so interviewees are valued equally for their time. The method of payment will be in vouchers. In the case of participants I am interviewing through NACRO, the vouchers will be given to the house manager to distribute to the participants upon completion of the interviews. For participants living independently in the community, I will give the vouchers directly to them. In the case of those pulling out of the interviews due to no longer wanting to be part of the study, no money will be paid.

Covid-19

I will follow the procedures of IOE protocol on COVID-19 in “Category 1”. At the time of writing, restrictions have been removed as the interviews will take place in the community. I will continue to liaise with ***** closer to the time of the interview if the situation changes.

Data storage processes

These processes also remain unchanged however I will no longer be using an encrypted prison security cleared Dictaphone. Instead, I will be using my phone to record the interviews and as per the original guidance, I will upload the data onto the secure UCL server ready for transcription on the day of recording. The recording will then be deleted from my phone.

Appendix D: Topic guide – The educational journeys of prison leavers

First interview with prison leaver

Introduction

- This project is about the educational journeys of prison leavers, thanks so much for taking part.
- Settling in questions – how are you feeling today, general comments, etc.
- Consent form

Section 1: Exploring memories of school

Tell me more about:

Prompts

- **Factual info**
 - Which schools did you go to? (Geographical area/ different types of schools/ PRU)
- **Memories of school** memories
 - Early Years? Primary? Secondary?
 - Differences between primary and secondary school?
 - Sense of belonging/ feel safe?
 - Best/worst memories?
 - Upbringing - Family expectations around education
- **Self as a learner**
 - Subject preference/enjoyment?
 - What was difficult about school?
 - Learning difficulties or disabilities (diagnosed and undiagnosed)?
 - Managing difficulties – seek help? Why/why not?
 - What happened if you didn't receive support? (Get angry/mess about with friends/disrespect teachers)
 - Trouble/truant?

Consequences? (Isolation/ exclusion/evictions)

Were boys and girls who got into trouble given different treatment?

Did they manage it differently?

- **Teachers**

Favourite teacher

Teachers – good or bad.

Gender of teacher

Teacher perception of you

- **Friends/ peers- relationships/ behaviours of different groups**

Group of friends- behaviours?

Popular/least popular kids?

Involved in fights - safety strategies? Girls or just boys?

Hardworking students? Gender?

- **Role models**

Who were your role models? (Footballer etc)

Did you have a dream for your future when you were a child?

School for children

Children?

How do your children find school?

How do you support them?

Do their experiences seem to be different to yours?

Do you behave differently about education compared to your upbringing?

Looking back...

What are your overriding feelings about the school system looking back?

Section 2

Exploring attitudes towards and engagement with prison education (PE)

Tell me more about:

Prompts

- Tell me about your experiences of prison education
- First contact?
- Assessments?
- Overall impressions of PE
- First stepping into prison classrooms (rudimentary/reminiscent of primary school/infantilised/memories of school)
- Peers in the classroom – what were your impressions of different abilities?
- Who refuses prison education and why?
- Who engages and why?
- How was your self-esteem/others self-esteem in the classroom?
- How did you cope/ feel others were coping?
- Support in classroom?
- Barriers to engagement?
- Covid-19 barriers?
- Has Prison education supported an expansion of skills (capabilities) in the present day?
- Changes to PE?

Exploring social life in prison

- What was your first night like in prison?
- What different types of people are there in prison?
- Who adapts well/not so well?
- Who did well socially?
- Who struggled socially?
- What is dangerous in prison environment?
- Did you witness any violence?
- What were your safety strategies?

Section 3: Exploring learning in the community

Prompts

Ex-offender organisation?

Learning since leaving prison?

What have been the successes?

Barriers?

What helped you to keep going? (Belonging/ support from teachers/ subject matter)

What are successes?

What are ongoing struggles?

Employability opportunities?

Probing questions:

- Can you expand more on ____?
- Can we return to this experience ____?
- Can you tell me more about ____?
- Tell me more about what you mean by that

Appendix E: NRC COVID-19 Risk Assessment Form

This form is compulsory for all NRC applicants who wish to conduct primary research, i.e. new applicants and those wanting to recommence research that was paused due to COVID-19.

Prior to submitting the risk assessment and the full application, applicants should read the NRC Medium-Term Plan on our website.⁴

Completed forms should be submitted alongside the full NRC application, or with amendments for paused research, to the NRC mailbox: National.Research@justice.gov.uk.

The information provided will allow reviewers to assess the risk and suitability of the project considering the current regime. The applicant should complete this to the best of their knowledge, including detail on all aspects. If not complete the NRC may request more information, which could delay the (re)commencement of research.

Name:	Angelique Mulholland
NRC Reference (where applicable):	
Research project title:	The educational journeys of prison leavers
Prison establishments, probation regions and/or CRCs to be accessed (include the NPS local delivery unit if known):	Probation region East Midlands
Current recovery stage or step at sites (if known):	Recovery stage?

⁴ Link to NRC webpage: <https://www.gov.uk/government/organisations/her-majestys-prison-and-probation-service/about/research>

Outline below how your research design has considered the response to COVID-19, with appropriate regard to maintaining a safe environment for all.

Risks (Max 250 words)

Applicants should outline any COVID-19 transmission-related risks of conducting this research. For example, risks of conducting face-to-face interviews or circulating paper questionnaires.

- a. Outline any potential risks to staff and people accommodated in prison or on supervision in the community
- b. Outline any potential risks to researchers
- c. List the potential harms and persons potentially affected

The primary method of data collection will be face-to-face interviews. This will involve two interviews with 20 participants who are living in the community; some will be living in supported housing under the supervision of leading UK ex-offender organisation, NACRO, and some will be living independently in the community and no longer under the supervision of probationary services.

Potential risks to staff and people on supervision in the community

There is a small chance of transmission of COVID-19 to participants from the researcher during interviews.

a. Potential risks to researchers

There is a small chance of transmission of COVID-19 to researcher from participants during the interviews.

b. Potential harms and persons potentially affected

Infected, researcher or participants will experience symptoms associated with COVID-19, which for most people are very mild.

Mitigations/Control Measures (Max 250 words)

Applicants should outline the control measures that will be in place to manage the risks identified.

Following University College London's IOE's COVID-19 protocol for face-to-face research, which is based on the government's recommendations of April 2022, please see below for control measures. At the time of writing (May 2022), all restrictions have been lifted in the community and my university protocol states that face-to-face interviews can be conducted with the precautions below. If local conditions change, for example there is a surge of COVID-19 in the local community, the researcher will follow the organisation's local procedures.

Control measures

- I am fully vaccinated and have regular booster vaccinations (latest one May 2022).

- I will liaise with the organisation to ensure the following:
 1. The interview room is well-ventilated
 2. Researcher will practice good hygiene by washing hands before and after every interview and clean the surroundings before and after each interview.
 3. Participants will be encouraged to practice good hygiene:
 - Hand sanitation offered
 - Cover coughs and sneezes
 4. Wear a face covering or a face mask if:
 - Participant has requested this
 - Local guidance or policy advises it

- 4. Liaise with staff to ensure any medically vulnerable participants are fully protected by in-house policy guidelines including wearing a mask or conducting interview by digital means if more appropriate.

Additional amendments and rationale

Due to the unprecedented pressures on the prison system due to the COVID-19 pandemic, HMPPS has issued a new moratorium on external research projects, and it is increasingly unlikely that access to my proposed site to carry out research during my funding period is possible. My planned research site was originally category B male prison, HMPPS Guys Marsh. I received full HMPPS NRC clearance for this fieldwork to commence in February 2022.

I have therefore made the difficult decision, in liaison with my supervisory team, to change fieldwork sites. I will now be conducting face-to-face interviews in the community via an ex-offender organisation NACRO (10 adult men on probation) and the Prisoners Educational Trust (PET) (10 adult men living independently in the community). The main aims and themes of my project remain unchanged, but the site changes and a few ethical considerations are discussed and considered below.

Site

I will be conducting interviews with prison leavers in the community, working in partnership with national ex-offender support organisation NACRO and PET.

For the interviews with NACRO (approximately ten participants or less), I will be conducting the interviews at their HMO office in Derby. The site is an administrative office and a resettlement accommodation for five prison leavers released from prison who are able to access the complex support needed to reintegrate into the community after serving their prison sentences. Some prison leavers may still be on probation. I have included details of my contact at NACRO, Andrea Coady, if you need further information.

The other ten participants have been recruited through the Prisoners Educational Trust. These participants are living independently in the community after serving their sentences and are no longer on probation. The interviews will be conducted online or in-person in a neutral place. I have included the details of my contact at PET, Francesca Cooney, if you need to contact her.

Research design

My research design will stay largely the same with a few small changes, detailed below:

Research questions

The research questions remain unchanged from original application, with minor edits to reflect the change in setting and participant. Setting is now “in the community” rather than prison, and participants are now “adult male prison leavers” rather than “adult male prison learners.”

Participants: Sample profile and recruitment

Participants are being recruited in the community, rather than prison, but the sample profile remains the same. I will be interviewing men of diverse ages, ethnicities and with a range of abilities who have all experienced time in prison. This profile will enable

me to capture the diversity of educational experiences. Recruitment of interviewees will be organised in two ways: with NACRO, my contact point will liaise with the house manager and I will play a smaller role in recruitment than in my previous project. I will also be advising the contact manager on the sample profile on whom would be ideal to recruit for the study. Recruitment via PET will involve liaising directly with people who have experienced prison and are now living independently in the community (and who are no longer on probation).

Ethical considerations

People leaving prison continue to be vulnerable and safeguarding their wellbeing throughout the research process is still a priority. The safeguarding processes proposed in the original ethics review remain unchanged. Well-being checks, support throughout interview process, processes around informed consent, anonymity/confidentiality including pseudonyms for all participants remain the same. The only change is that I will be liaising with their support worker, instead of their personal prison officer. In the case of participants with a low level of literacy, I will work with their support workers to ensure that the participants fully understand the process and that they can opt out at any point. I have conducted a meeting with the NACRO team and we have discussed in detail the safeguarding processes for each interview. In the unlikely event of a participant posing challenging behaviour, the support worker will be on site, and in some cases in the interview room, throughout the interviews in case of any problems and to ensure my safety should any unforeseen challenges arise. Well-being checks after the interviews will be via the support worker.

In the case of participants who am I meeting through PET, all of the participants live independently in the community. The meeting will take place in a neutral location such as a café, library or it will be conducted online via digital comms. In the unlikely event that anything upsetting comes up during the interview, or the participant seems distressed, I will follow up with them directly a few days after the interview to check on how they are doing.

Data storage processes

These processes also remain unchanged however I will no longer be using an encrypted prison security cleared Dictaphone. Instead, I will be using my phone to record the interviews and as per the original guidance, I will upload the data onto the secure UCL server ready for transcription on the day of recording. The recording will then be deleted from my phone.

Financial incentives

Due to the difficulty in recruiting participants, especially those who are newly released from prison, I have been granted funding through the ESRC (the funding body of my research) to offer compensation for participants for both travel and time. I have secured £40 worth of vouchers for each participant's completion of the two-part interview process.

Although not all the participants will be travelling, as I will be visiting them, the equal payment is ensuring fairness in the research process, so interviewees are valued equally for their time. The method of payment will be in vouchers. In the case of

participants, I am interviewing through NACRO, the vouchers will be given to the house manager to distribute to the participants upon completion of the interviews. For participants living independently in the community, I will give the vouchers directly to them. In the case of those pulling out of the interviews due to no longer wanting to be part of the study, no money will be paid.

Appendix F: The Educational Journeys of Adult Male Prison Leavers –Participant Consent Form

If you are happy to participate in this study, please complete this consent form by ticking each item, as appropriate, and return to Angelique by email:

- 1) I have read and understood the information sheet, and have had the opportunity to consider the information, ask questions, and have had my questions answered. ☐
- 2) I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time, without giving any reason. ☐
- 3) I know that I can refuse to answer any or all of the questions and that I can withdraw from the interview at any point. ☐
- 4) I agree for the interview to be recorded, and that recordings will be kept secure and destroyed at the end of the project. I know that all data will be kept under the terms of the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR). ☐
- 5) I agree that small direct quotes may be used in reports (these will be anonymised). ☐
- 6) I understand that in exceptional circumstances anonymity and confidentiality would have to be broken, for example, if the researcher feels that either you or someone else is at risk of harm. In these circumstances advice would be sought and the appropriate course of action as to whether we need to inform the authority of what you have told us. ☐
- 7) I understand that the interview will be recorded. I also understand that this is for the purposes of an aide memoire for the researcher. Once the interview has been transcribed, the recording will be permanently deleted. ☐

Name:.....

Signature: Date:

Name of researcher: Angelique Mulholland

Signature:  Date: 01/2/2023