



Making a difference in prison with Storybook Dads

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Introduction

The family is the most important factor in a child's life, whatever the formation of the family may be. From the beginning, the family – consciously and sub-consciously – teaches the newborn about its world. Schools can teach a child to read – but the family can foster a love of reading. Families of prisoners are often the forgotten victims of crime. Children of prisoners suffer from high levels of anxiety, isolation and poverty.

*“Rukutia te taura tangata ki te pou-whare
Motu te taura! Motu atu te tangata.”*

Maintain the family links. If the family links are broken the individual is lost.

“Family learning covers all forms of informal and formal learning that involves more than one generation. It includes learning about roles, relationships and responsibilities in relation to family life and learning how to understand to take responsibility and make decisions in relation to wider society.” (Campaign for Learning, 2007)

“Imprisonment always brings about dismemberment for a man with a family because it involves taking the man away from his home to place him in custody.” (Deane, 1988)

The Storybook Dads Project

Storybook Dads, a voluntary programme, is offered as an opportunity for prisoners who have children to make a DVD and connect with them. Begun at HMP Dartmoor in Devon and now used in over 40 prisons in the UK, the *Storybook Dads* project supports prisoners in recording themselves telling a story to their children. The programme was introduced to Otago Corrections Facility in 2007 by the programmes manager and The Methodist Mission – Approach Community Learning, and approximately 100 men have been through the programme.

Storybook Dads is an opportunity for men to maintain contact with their children while they are in prison. It is a programme with literacy skills embedded throughout that runs for 10 two-hour sessions and is offered three times a year. Our programme changed to meet the local environment. The UK programme had started as a voice recording with music and sound effects. We started producing a DVD with a voice recording and copies of pictures from the storybook. The result is a DVD of the father reading a book and this, along with a hard copy of the book, is delivered to the children in time for Easter, Fathers Day or Christmas. The men who attend the programme will, in most cases, have completed a parenting course, which is thought to make them programme ready. This works really well and the men appreciate the chance to discuss skills they have learned during the course. A group of men transferred from another facility on the North Island also found the programme valuable as it allowed them to be able to do something for their children.

The men read a favourite children’s book, and this is recorded with pictures onto a DVD to go home to their children. The process involves the selection of an appropriate story, and reading and articulation skills, which include character, voices, phrasing, and creating an atmosphere where children will want to join in. It also involves storyboarding skills, where the way the story will be told is set out on paper and includes any extras such as background music, sound effects, and special messages the men may want to give. Included in this process is the making of a card to go with the DVD. All this not only improves literacy skills, but also further develops parenting skills, appropriate language and behaviour. and the opportunity to be a father within the confines of the prison walls. Examples of evaluations are:

“Excellent course, with an awesome purpose – a rare opportunity in jail to do something for our children.”

“Because of this course my baby will be proud of me.”

“First time I read a story to my boys.”

The men who have been through the programme are very positive about their experience and through the sharing of their experience of the programme they encourage other prisoners to want to be included. As such the programme often has more men wanting to be involved than there are places for. Usually about 5 or 6 of the men who have been through the programme ask to be included in the next

programme, to create another DVD for another of their children or because they had got so much from the programme the first time they would like to practise and embed that learning.. Selection for the programme is done by the Otago Corrections Facility Programmes Manager. There are 10–12 men on each programme at one time. At the time of writing, we have collected literacy data on the TEC progressions for 36 men who had been through the programme.

Literacy Gains Achieved Through the Practice

Anecdotal feedback is that *Storybook Dads* provides a contextualised, personal and successful learning environment due to the embedded nature of the literacy component. Literacy is a social practice, not merely a technical skill: “*Literacy is not simply knowing how to read and write a particular script, but applying this knowledge for specific purposes or specific contexts of use*” (Scribner & Cole 1981 p. 236). Literacy practice contextualises literacy for the prisoners. While there are very few genuine ways to do this in the prison itself, *Storybook Dads* provides a powerful context for literacy delivery. Searle (1999) notes that literacy is a purposeful social practice, and is shaped by the relationships, values and ideologies of those involved, placing the power in the hands of the learner – it is their context, and as such they control their learning. Literacy is power and therefore what we do as educators is important. The *Storybook Dads* programme aims to empower the prisoners – focussing on prisoner illiteracy is power, but focussing on understanding culture and contextualisation is empowering; following a set curriculum is power, but being flexible to meet each individual’s needs and situation is empowering; tutors as teachers is power, but tutors as facilitators is empowering; traditional classroom environment is power, but using peers and real contextualising of literacy is empowering.

The Literacy levels of the men are measured against the TEC literacy progressions. The first recording the men make is analysed and their literacy is matched against the literacy progressions. The final recording is also analysed and matched against the literacy progressions. This can show clearly the literacy gains made by each individual.

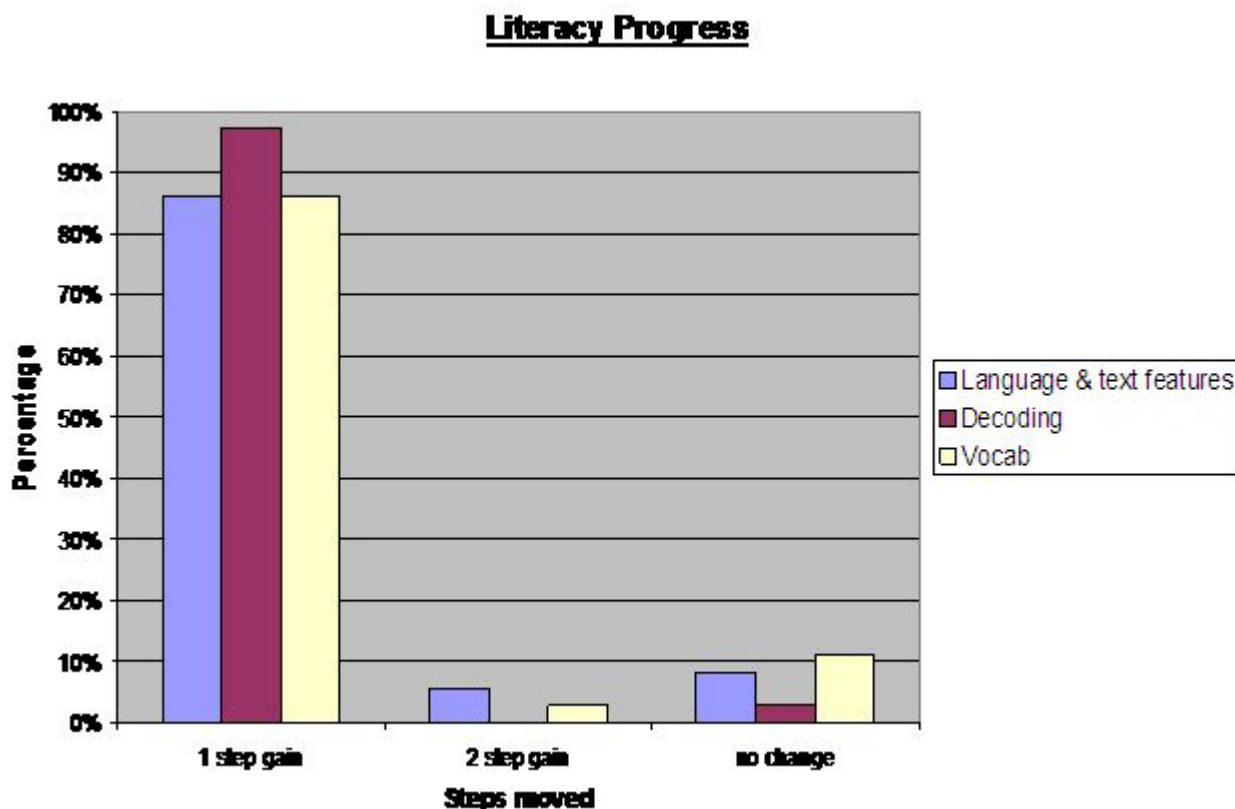
The strand used is the ‘Read with Understanding’, which includes the measuring of language and text features, decoding skills, and vocabulary skills. The data we have gathered show that a significantly high percentage of the prisoners made literacy gains of at least one step as measured against these progressions: 92% made gains in the language and text features strand; 97% made gains in decoding; and 89% made gains in their vocabulary development.

The TEC progressions measure from step 1 to step 6; step 6 indicating very high levels of literacy. Approximately 44% of the prisoners started at step 1, 36% started at step 2, and 14% started at step 3. Most of the men made progress of one step, some men made two-step gains, and for some there was no change (see figure 1). Our data show that 86% of prisoners made progress of one step in the language and text features and one step in the vocabulary progression, while 97% made progress of one step in the decoding progression. For a 20-hour face-to-face group work programme this is extraordinary, given that Benseman, Sutton and Lander (2005), when conducting a comprehensive review of international research to identify factors likely to contribute to learner gain, identified deliberate and sustained acts of teaching with high levels of participation for a minimum of **100 hours** regular contact delivery as one of eight key factors.

Our data also show that a small percentage of the prisoners (3–6%) made two- step gains!

Further analysis of the data also shows that 44% (36 men) made a one-step gain from Step 1 to Step 2; 3% made a two-step gain from Step 1 to Step 3; 36% made a one-step gain from Step 2 to Step 3; 11–14% made a one-step gain from Step 3 to Step 4; 3% made a two-step gain (only on the Language and Text Features progression) from Step 3 to Step 5; 4% made a one-step gain from Step 3 to Step 4; and 3% made a one-step gain (on the Language and Text Features progression, and the Vocabulary progression) from Step 4 to Step 5.

Figure 1: Literacy progress



The men made significant progress with their literacy. As they chose books to read, they played around with the words in the stories, testing them out for their rhyme and rhythm, the way the words flowed off their tongues. Initially rejecting a book because the words looked ‘too hard’, they could be encouraged to think again as we suggested reading it through with them, discussing how the words could be broken down, introducing syllables and how working through words was an example to their children. One man produced a beautiful DVD where he burst out laughing in the middle of the recording because he got so tongue-tied reading a Dr Seuss story.

The ability to decode words improved greatly and the men’s vocabulary was extended as they read new words or discussed appropriate greetings to their families. They gained an understanding of language and text features by looking at the use of punctuation and grammar, and the way these features can influence how we read a story, and contribute to creating an atmosphere. By playing around with changing voices and different tones, and using puppets to emphasise different characters, the men really examined the way stories are crafted. For some men this was a new experience, and they began

to appreciate and develop an enthusiasm for the stories they had chosen and a desire to read more and more.

Social Benefits Achieved Through the Practice

The stories also brought up talk of their own childhood and their expectations and hopes for their children – that they wouldn't make the "stupid choices" their fathers had made. The spontaneous conversations that would occur around the table with the tutors as part of the group or the times we deliberately stepped back to give them space were some of the best teaching opportunities we have had. The men would often ask what we would say to our own children if certain behaviour or events happened, how we would deal with something. Moments like these provided chances to explore the role-modelling aspect of parenting and the way language can be used as power.

"For the children, the benefits are enormous: reduced separation anxiety, more settled behaviour and an enhanced awareness of literacy skills". (HM Prison Service)

Tutor Perspectives

As females in an intensely male environment, the two tutors found that the programme produced some challenges as well as a range of rewards. We had the opportunity to model behaviour and communicate our expectations of their behaviour towards us, particularly as women. We became a strong partnership as we spent much time reflecting on our own behaviour, our collegial relationship and the need to present a united front. The following example is indicative: when some calligraphy pens went missing from our class, we spent a week agonising how to approach this. Should we say nothing or should we take the pens back and discuss the situation? But what should we say? We didn't want to appear 'school-marmish', we didn't want to guilt-trip or shame them; rather we wanted to let them think about the choices they had made. Our choice was to speak to the men about it, pointing out the limited budget of the course and how they jeopardised the future of the course by stealing limited resources. Our decision to discuss the situation had a surprising effect. Every week after that the men would actively make sure that everything we had taken in was in the box to go home!

Within the group we have discussions about stories, the importance of stories throughout the ages, the skill of the oral storytellers, how people find meaning, take courage, find their history within stories. For men with low literacy skills it is a chance to read at an appropriate level without insulting their adult status. Children's stories are a great leveller – there is always unreserved excitement when the books are put on the table and the men find stories from their childhood.

"The outcomes in adult life are often the product of educational and social processes comprising a combination of influences in which literacy plays a part." (Clark & Dugdale 2008 p. 3)

The majority of the men were products of broken homes, with background experience of violence, drug abuse, gang involvement, some had been in foster care for most of their lives, and for some their parents, siblings and children were also in prison. One man spoke of being on the streets from the age of nine; at the age of 21 he already had two young children to two different mothers. He had no knowledge of how to be a father but he did have a desire to learn.

Many of the men who attended this course had never read a story to their children, confirming the findings of the Prisoners' Education Trust in the UK that "a high percentage of prisoners were never read to as a child and have never read to their own children." Some men, however, shared stories about playing music and telling stories to babies in their mother's wombs, and of fun times with children. Others admitted that they missed being able to make things with their children and couldn't wait to get back to them.

Clark and Dugdale (2008) argue that "*The idea that if you can get people to spell and add-up, they can become better citizens is rubbish. You have to improve self-esteem*" (p.3). We see a difference in the men from the start of the course to the end of the course. The first time we ran the course we were slightly worried that we might be chased out of the prison for suggesting that grown men should read children's storybooks. However, they embraced the concept and the opportunity. It is a positive and enlightening experience to work with the men and see them grow, see their work take shape, help some of them work through their initial reluctance as a result of their own lack of literacy skills, and see their faces when they watch their DVD before it is sent.

Storybook Dads gives the men a chance to participate in what many consider a 'normal' parental interaction. The men get the chance to make something for their children that most fathers never do, and they realise this. They understand that what they are sending home is much more than a card and a DVD, it is a representation of love and the fact that parenting doesn't stop just because they aren't there.

Research from the UK programme showed that one young child slept through the whole night for the first time since her father had been imprisoned – before that she simply could not comprehend where her father had gone. For her heavily pregnant mother this was a huge relief.

Evaluation

The measurement of the literacy gains made by the men using the TEC Literacy Progressions clearly shows the literacy value of the programme. The men themselves complete a formal evaluation of the programme to identify areas they enjoyed and areas they felt could be improved. Almost without exception, the feedback is positive, and the men often comment and are thankful for the opportunity to be a father, to think about their children and families, and to have the opportunity to create something special for their children. Within the space created by this course they are able to talk about their children and use endearments without feeling silly. Anecdotal evidence is also collected when the men who receive feedback from their families on how the DVD was received. One man brought pictures of his child watching the DVD and showed them with obvious pride.

The men are very proud of what they have achieved; the end product is a very tangible result of their time, energy and effort throughout the 10 weeks. At the end of the course, there is recognition from the men that they have developed the skills to be able to read in a fun way to their children.

"I haven't seen my kids for ages and this is a great way to let them know I'm still around and they can actually hear me reading them a story. It helps bring the books alive." (Otago Daily Times, 7 March 2008)

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Media coverage

- [Storybook Dads teaches literacy and parenting skills](#) - Arts Access Aotearoa, 11 June 2010
- [Father's Day behind bars](#) - Otago Daily Times, 4 September 2010
- [Storybook Dads](#) - Nine to Noon, Radio New Zealand National, 7 July 2010



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