



Board Briefing

January 2010

Expanding the realms of self-expression: posing issues for programme construction

We are able to show from our many and varied projects that prison has an overwhelmingly deleterious impact on offenders, the effects of which make them less able to live in society in their post-prison worlds.

Amongst the worst impacts on individuals, we count the following:

- Memory steadily erodes in prison; this includes long-term memory of people in families and communities, and also short-term memory involved in accomplishing learning in day-to-day programme tasks.
- With the cognitively diminishing ability of memory, levels of concentration are also attenuated; it is striking how accomplishing complex learning tasks in groups can be arduous.
- Exclusion from social and religious rituals, especially from funerals of members of families, seems to have an impact on positive attitudes to society and how ex-prisoners might seek help from others. Nonchalance about the actions of fate seems to ensue, which subverts the core question of any rehabilitative prison programme: what is it to be an agentive moral citizen?
- Possibly as a consequence of these effects of imprisonment, serving prisoners begin to think of the future in fanciful ways that are unrealistic and improbable. Conceiving and talking about the immense hurdles that ex-prisoners have to face in daily life become ever more difficult as the years of a sentence pass by. Fanciful notions of how prisoners see their return to family take hold and a piecing together in mind of probable links between cause and effect in a post-prison world become ever more illusory. Speculation about the future breaks free of a mooring to an accurately conceived reality.

- Ideas and commitments to altruism wither under the persistent strategic and manipulative thinking that is characteristic of daily prison life, especially as individuals are always on the lookout for their own safety. One overriding motive colours thought and all commitments: this involves how to get out of prison through parole. The idea of “self-disclosure” that may be in touch with the verities of family life becomes alien and the idea of “personal sincerity” is thwarted.

However, against these effects, it is also striking how intensely moral language is in prison group work. We encourage Phoenix Facilitators to be inventive and experimental in finding forms of expression, symbols and metaphors that expand ways of thinking about oneself, therefore contributing to capacities for self-expression.

Artistic work of varying kinds has been particularly valuable. We often see an implicit acknowledgment that verbal language for prisoners is “corrupted” as a medium for showing the experiences in one’s life that are most real, and evokes all the deleterious aspects of prison life we enumerate above.

A few examples are given below of how art can contribute to an expansion of an ability to think about past and future, and perhaps the social causes of present predicaments.

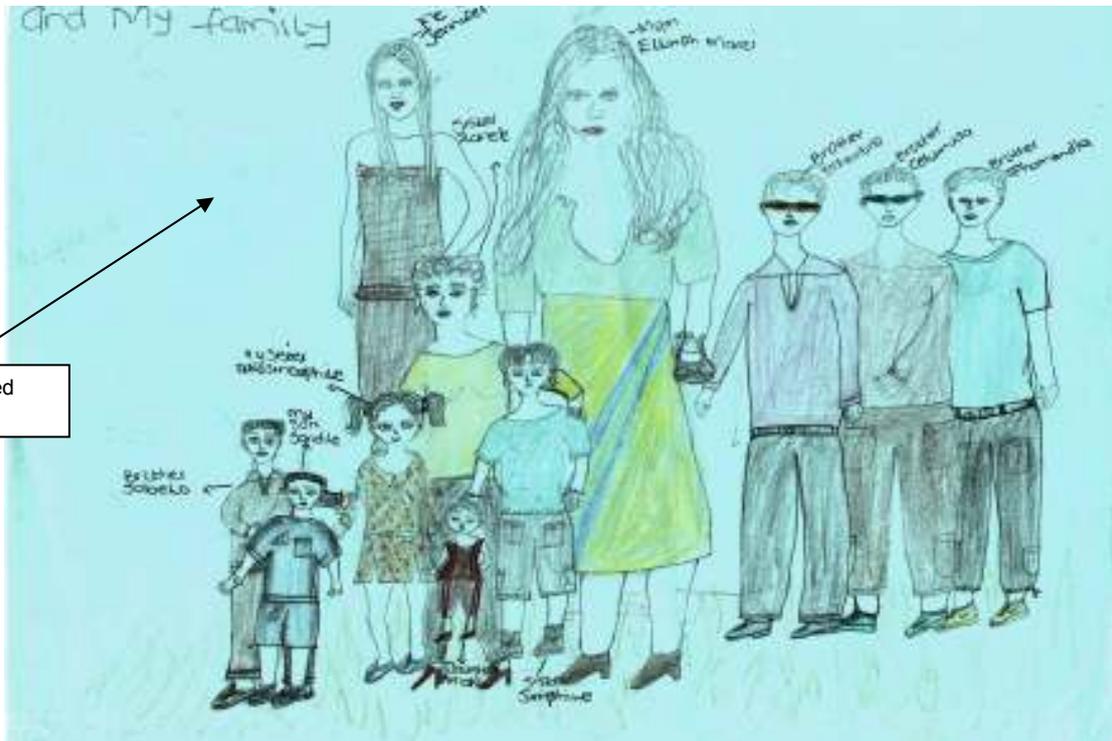
The first example is a series of drawings by a young woman participant in ***Starting with Us***. In this programme, she spent a great deal of time drawing pictures of her family. The first impression from these portrayals is of considerable harmony and good order. The artist places herself contiguously with her parents, depicted here in an affectionate embrace. The relative size of mother and artist is probably significant. Generally, the picture is colourful, exudes a sense of well-being, and is drawn on a large piece of A2 paper.



Many weeks later, in a following programme, ***Conversations in Families***, the artist again drew her family. The Facilitator was astonished to see changes coming about in the subsequent picture, this time drawn on a small piece of A4 paper.

The most consequential change came about in the actual execution of the drawing. A great deal of time was spent drawing the father figure in the blank space in the left part of the picture, and then an even longer period was spent erasing the figure, line by line, substantially wearing out a rubber eraser in the process. What is left is merely the deep pencil indentation in the paper where the father figure once was.

Note also the change in colouring, now a much more sombre palette.



Apparently, we have here a reversal of what we generally seek in ***Conversations in Families*** – in the programme we seek imaginative attempts to integrate family and the agentive role the subject could have within a supportive harmony. The progress through the differing conceptions of the family in the drawings is in fact doing the opposite – fragmenting concord. However, it seems to us that the first picture was an expression of sheer fantasy, perhaps wishful thinking. Yet the most significant aspect of the fantasy was possibly reluctance, perhaps inability, to conceive of the reality. This started to emerge in the discussion about the second picture, which is a story of abuse, the illicit and manipulative use of witchcraft and a thoroughly dysfunctional family. Note how the young men in the picture have had their inscrutability highlighted by the depiction of sunglasses although in her narrative of their place in the family, the fact that they are twins shields them from their father’s illicit use of witchcraft, protection the artist does not share.

Implicating her father in her predicament, by drawing attention to his nefarious activities, at first glance suggests an attempt to alienate her own culpability for wrongs committed. Nevertheless, the unfolding art in this instance seems to be getting near the core of matters, perhaps disturbingly so – whatever the details, the fact of perversity is manifest. We raise the question for Phoenix programmes as a whole, (like the poet) can we bear too much reality, especially in a prison world that sets out to vitiate any human being’s cognitive ability to start making sense of the social world? In our example, the travail of that social background, at the end of a long sequence of lived events, has ended up with one person going to prison. What power of self-elucidation has to go into making sense of a life given the social context of this family?

The Phoenix team is aware of the enormity of the task they set themselves in constructing programmes that try to help participants bring “strong verbs” back into their lives – being assertive enough to describe and picture their circumstances with the force of veracity. It may be presumptuous to try to do so, and we are alert to the idea that without substantial professional skills in our Facilitators, we should be cautious in embracing therapeutic objectives. The burden on “curriculum construction” for Phoenix Zululand is considerable.

The second example depicts a story of violence.



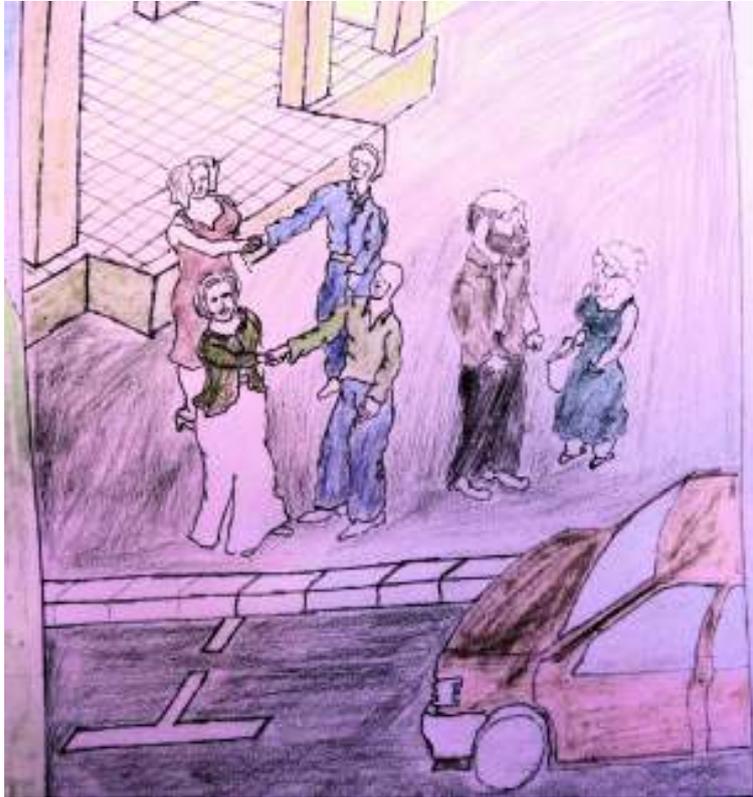
Pencil crayon on A2 paper.

This drawing portrays narratively a car hijacking at gun point and the astonishingly evoked violence of this in the top row of scenes. It is replete with guns, speeding cars, and a car crash, and a subsequent arrest resulting in a jail sentence. The images of the violence are quite evidently burned ineradicably into the memory of the artist. Our discussion with the Phoenix Facilitator from whose group work this drawing emerged suggested to us that there are crucial areas of silence: it is as if the drawing deliberately forecloses on awareness of the planning that the hijackers put into the events shown. The artist would be able to muster the technical ability to deal with this aspect of the tale but has chosen not to do so. To help the artist develop a creative awareness (which would bring to mind all the woes of his background that lead him to criminal activity) must surely require of him that he deals artistically with the potential scenes *antecedent* to those portrayed.

There are further connections to be made. The bottom sequence of scenes entails jail, and then a restorative process with victims and perpetrators shaking hands. We guess that the

artist's mind races on speculatively to play with ideas about how he might leave jail; perhaps, he seems to reason, if he could demonstrate that his victims shake his hand, parole would come all the sooner!

Here is the final scene, magnified:



The scene comes from the artist's fantasy-world and as such is facile. The force of violence is cogently remembered and shown in the drawing. Yet the future with some putative "reconciliation" apparently so easily achieved has cut adrift from any probable reality. His interest in restoration has a utilitarian logic to it. We believe that there is a connection between a failure to depict (and confront) all the things that went into conceiving and planning a major criminal act, and the resolution imagined once retribution holds sway through the criminal justice system. Herein lies the problem. Phoenix Facilitators repeatedly find themselves saying in their group work that post-prison life is mercilessly tough and unyielding, and the key to successful social reintegration will often be in the ability to express a sense of personal vulnerability and in knowing how to ask for help from those around. This is more valuable than proclaiming contrition for crimes committed and extolling the virtues of restorative justice. In any case, restorative acts are never easily achieved, as suggested by this tendentious drawing.

This is an immensely difficult point to get across.

The final example is rich in metaphorical resonance. We have in our considerable collection of prisoner art a large number of pictures depicting the “magical” potential that awaits one’s post-prison existence following parole. The next drawing actually plays with the hypothesis of a “glorious” material liberation after prison. Yet the visual grammar of motifs present here is repeated many hundreds of times across many different prisons. Material affluence is to be flaunted before others - this drawing goes so far as to depict glass walls so the possessions can be publicly displayed; there is a domestic servant readily visible; but perhaps most common of all motifs, there is a strong perimeter to keep it all safe from criminals and as bulwark against chaos!



The salient point about this drawing is that memory is working here in a precise and accurate way, even to the point that the makes of cars are clearly evident. How does this square with one of the assertions made in this Briefing that the functioning of memory is damaged by prison? Perhaps it is that memory under the cognitively disabling conditions of prison does indeed hang on to some things in all their precise detail: a person will remember with considerable clarity all the things, symbols and experiences that register his economic humiliation and failure. [We allude here to the work of Richard Wilkinson, particularly (1996) *Unhealthy Societies: the Afflictions of Inequality*, London.]

This seems to be the agonisingly poignant burden of this drawing.

Pursuing this idea into the realm of programme construction is of course complex.