

CS10: HMP BLAKENHURST MONTHLY 2-DAY DIALOGUES VP

by Peter Garrett and Jane Ball

Context

HMP Blakenhurst was opened in 1993 as a local prison run by a private company, UKDS. The contract required the prison to provide non-accredited group work and meet set targets for purposeful activity for all prisoners. Prison Dialogue (PD) had been contributing substantially to these targets since 1998 by running monthly 2-day Dialogues for main location prisoners who resided in the 4 main house blocks. House Block 5 was a Vulnerable Prisoner (VP) unit, housing prisoners under protection because of the nature of their offence (sexual offences, sexual offences against children, child murder or violence against women, children or the elderly), because of drug debts, because they were informers or because they were unable to cope in the main part of the prison due to age or mental health problems. This was a difficult, potentially toxic mix of prisoners to house together. VPs were separated from other prisoners at all times (including for activities, movement and housing) and as a result they had limited access to activities. In early 2000, the Unit Manager asked PD to run Dialogue sessions for the VPs on House Block 5 and they subsequently ran for 2 years. PD had extensive experience, having run weekly Dialogues for VPs in HMP Whitemoor since 1995 (see CS2) and saw this as an opportunity to extend its work across the HMP Blakenhurst prison system.

Aims and Objectives

The VP Unit was isolated within the prison and represented only 10% of the prisoner population. Many staff were uncomfortable with the VPs' offences and avoided working with them, whilst most managers were so busy with the other 90% that they were unable to attend to the unique needs of that House Block. HMP Blakenhurst was committed, however, to provide equality of access to the regime for VPs wherever possible, and to increase purposeful activity. The prison was also concerned that with such a difficult mix of prisoners some were creating a power base for themselves among the more vulnerable prisoners, and could be trying to groom and intimidate staff.

PD facilitators, already involved in the main Dialogues, could learn additional skills by facilitating a VP group where the dynamics were different, as seen at

the VP Dialogues in HMP Whitemoor. For example, talking and thinking with people who have committed abhorrent crimes can raise personal questions and challenges for the facilitators themselves as well as for other participants.

Method:

The monthly 2-day Dialogue pattern from the main Dialogues was used as the basis for the VPs, with 8 additional weekly dialogues during the first 2 months to help the start up. Sessions ran from July 2000 to August 2002. Between 10 and 26 prisoners attended, on average 16, with 2 discipline officers and a senior discipline officer or senior case manager. The senior manager responsible for the unit attended the first 2-day Dialogue and regularly by request thereafter. All prisoners were resident on House Block 5, so the unit staff identified participants and attended themselves in the early months. 2 PD facilitators led the session together. By then the Dialogue facilitation pattern was well established. As well as facilitating the open Dialogues, which took most of the time, there was a sign-in book for all participants, a welcome and introduction about Dialogue by participants for any new participants who joined, the use of a check-in, the introduction or reminder of the Dialogic Practices (Voice, Listen, Respect, Suspension) later in the first day, and a report was compiled by participants at the close and circulated on the unit and to all managers. Subjects were varied and included themes such as coping with the challenges of life on this small enclosed unit, particularly for prisoners who were pensioners and hardly got off the unit because they could not work, the abuse they faced because of being a VP, seeing the risk of harm to others in our behaviour, when "high jinks" become bullying, the "rackets people play. Due to the challenging diversity of the group and their extremely varied interests and views, they needed to work to find a way to talk together.

A development of the Dialogue arose after 6 months when one of the prisoners brought a poem he had written to read to the group to express feelings that he struggled to articulate spontaneously in the Dialogue. Others then did the same and poetry writing and readings became a regular part of the group on the morning of Day 2, giving new members and staff the option to write something over night. Eventually almost everyone brought a poem and the Dialogue was a major monthly event for which people prepared thoughtfully.

There was a briefing and debriefing meeting with staff, and a more in-depth reflection for the PD team at the end of Day 1 and again at the end of Day 2. External supervision was also available to PD facilitators.

Outcomes

Approximately 20% of the prisoners on House Block 5 were in the Dialogues regularly, so it was possible to have a significant impact on the unit culture. The atmosphere was improved by the constructive relationships that were formed in the Dialogues, particularly between different sub-groups of prisoners, such as those who were there because of the nature of their sexual offences and those who were there because of drug debts. They met as people not as offenders, or by their assumed offence. They found that the 'others' were intelligent and compassionate, and that they could talk and work together successfully. *"My heart goes out to John (not his real name). Respect to him. When I first saw him I thought I'd hate him but I've seen a different side"* Prisoner. This helped them to maintain a sense of their humanity and dignity, even when they faced daily verbal abuse shouted at them by main prisoners out of their cell windows. Staff from the main prison became more confident working with VPs and some went on to train and work on the Sex Offender Treatment Programme. Managers better understood the needs of House Block 5 and improved services as a result. For example a Listeners service, involving prisoners trained by Samaritans to listen to depressed and suicidal prisoners, was set up there as a direct result of a conversation in a Dialogue session.

When the contract for running the prison changed in 2001 the reduced staffing levels for House Block 5 meant that fewer staff and Managers were available to attend the Dialogue. In the end this led PD to withdraw the Dialogue on House Block 5.

Learning

Prisoners learned to express themselves, especially through the use of poetry. Prison staff learned to engage with the person rather than the offence and discovered the professional satisfaction of operating in that way. Previously facilitators had learned how to facilitate the transformation of frustration, anger and violence. With the VP Dialogues the PD facilitators learned to facilitate the transformation of shame, secrecy, and use of humour and politeness to avoid authentic conversation. They learned how metaphor and

poetry could be used to explore feelings and experiences that are otherwise difficult to express openly because of shame and fears of the repercussions of doing so. Once brought out in their poems, the experiences and emotions were more discussable. This externalising process is fundamental to the healing of this particular grouping of people.

“What we heard this afternoon is very encouraging. Through the trials and tribulations of doing bird you can write poems and express yourselves.... I want to encourage you to keep writing the poetry, make a book of your poems, then people might begin to understand some of the traumas you have to go through.” Prison Manager.

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