



The Voice of
Adult Learning

‘THE FIRST THING IS A LISTENING EAR’: THE TRANSFORMATIVE IMPACT OF THE DILLON’S CROSS PROJECT

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Abstract

This article is a qualitative analysis of the experiences of five adult learners and three service providers who have participated in the educational programmes of the Dillon's Cross Project, a Cork Education and Training Board project that provides educational support to the female relatives of prisoners and ex-prisoners. The article will analyse the interview data of five adult learners and three service providers and present a comprehensive overview of their experiences with incarcerated family members, education support services, and the impact these experiences have had on their lives. By speaking directly to learners, and those working directly with them in the service, the research aims to illustrate the transformative impact of the Dillon's Cross Project and to provide an evidence base for future advocacy work in the area of educational support services for vulnerable and disadvantaged groups.

Introduction

The interviews analysed in this article were conducted by AONTAS with three staff members and five women who are service users of the Dillon's Cross Project, a community education service for the female relatives of prisoners and ex-prisoners. The programme is based in the Glen Resource Centre, Cork, and caters to residents of The Glen, a traditionally impoverished area, and surrounding areas in Cork. The Dillon's Cross Project offers a QQI Level 3 Certificate in General Learning, as well as additional Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI) Level 4 modules, and caters for 12 to 14 learners per year. The project also offers opportunities for learners to engage with the Glen Community Garden, a garden located at the Glen Resource Centre where weekly gardening groups and workshops are held, and the Health Service Executive's Wellness Recovery Action Plan, a two-day group programme that looks at recovery concepts and self-care tools (Cork Education and Training Board, 2023).

Cork Prison itself is located in The Glen, and local residents colloquially refer to Cork Prison as 'The Hotel on the Hill'. As the interviews reflect, a number of families from The Glen and surrounding areas have experienced the imprisonment of multiple family members across generations. There are high rates of recidivism in this prison population and high rates of intergenerational crime. While the analysis of the interviews explores the women's self-reported experiences with family members' imprisonment, the main purpose of the interviews was to investigate the value of the education service in the women's own words. As such, the following section focuses mainly on how the interviewees have described their engagement with the education service and how they have conceptualised its role in their lives. The voices of the community education practitioners have also been included, as they provide a valuable insight into the resources that are required to successfully run the service to the extent that it provides demonstrable benefits to the women who participate.

The Cork Education and Training Board, one of 16 bodies which oversee the provision of Further Education and Training in Ireland, began providing an education service on a part-time basis to Cork Prison in 1978. Prison education services typically focus on providing educational opportunities and support to prisoners themselves. Research by Kennedy

(2010) explores the perspectives of Prison Educators on education services in Irish prisons. More recently, research by Cleere and Maguire (2013) and O'Sullivan, Hart, and Healy (2018) has investigated prisoners' experiences with education services, with a focus on the link between prison education services and reduced recidivism. While there is little research on the success and outcomes of prison education services in an Irish context, we can look to international examples to determine education programmes' impact on prisoners. In a United States context, research by Duwe and Clark (2014), for example, found that engagement in prison education, specifically the obtainment of secondary and post-secondary degrees, resulted in higher rates of post-release employment and lower recidivism. Similarly, Vandala (2019), provides an analysis of the effect of correctional education on previously incarcerated individuals in South Africa. Collectively, these studies highlight the need for and benefit of educational services aimed at prisoners and ex-prisoners.

Women with family members in prison suffer from financial and social disadvantage, yet are not often given access to the same education outreach services as their imprisoned partners and family members. The Dillon's Cross Project is one such exception. A community education service located in the heart of a working-class community in Cork, it offers educational courses in areas such as computer skills, adult literacy, and numeracy. Through the service, women can also access free psychological counselling. The centre also provides a crucial social space for the women which allows them to engage not only in peer learning but also offer mutual support to one another as they undergo the hardships of having a family member in prison. In this sense, the education service impacts the women's lives not only by providing a route to formal educational qualifications and increased employment opportunities, but also by providing a non-judgemental social space where important relationships can be developed and sustained.

As mentioned above, little research to date has explored or measured the impact of prison education outreach services for the family members of prisoners in Ireland, particularly for women. There is further scope for both quantitative and qualitative studies of the impact and benefits of prison education services aimed at supporting the family members of prisoners in Ireland. This study, however, takes a qualitative approach to understanding the

impact of the education service; it does not measure the women's educational outcomes or qualifications, but captures the subjective meaning they make of their educational experiences with the Dillon's Cross Project. The article is intended to document the value of the education service and to highlight its success as a pilot project in mitigating the social and educational disadvantages experienced by populations affected by imprisonment, and specifically the female family members of prisoners.

Methodology and Research Methods

The research methodology and design applied a feminist research perspective, which focuses on the experiences of women in their natural social environments, where the intention is to 'make women visible, raise their consciousness and empower them' (Holloway and Wheeler, 2013, p. 258). Feminist research is characterised by understanding women's experiences, promoting their voices, enhancing their positioning in society, creating new knowledge and ultimately bringing about social change (Letherby, 2003). Feminist research also requires that issues around gender inequality, diversity, social change and the empowerment of women are also recognised and addressed (Fonow and Cook, 2005). Qualitative semi-structured interviews were used as a medium to gather rich, in-depth knowledge of the women's experiences from their own perspectives (Gray et al. 2015).

The data that subsequently emerged from the interviews was analysed using thematic and interpretative phenomenological analysis (Ritchie and Lewis, 2003). Thematic analysis is the process of identifying, analysing and cataloguing patterns or themes in the research (Braun and Clarke, 2006). Ideas, language, and stories on their own can often lack evidentiary weight but when systematically and simultaneously brought together and informed by the literature, a comprehensive picture of a collective experience emerges (Aronson, 1994). For example, several participants spoke of the ridicule they experienced from a number of individuals in their communities when engaging with the Dillon's Cross Project. The literature indicated that members of a disadvantaged community may ridicule a member of that community for trying to break the cycle of poverty or disadvantage because of the collective experience of fatalism, hopelessness and poor self-esteem resulting from

systematic neglect (Durnescu, 2019). As a service provider in the Dillon's Cross Project explained:

You know that story with the lobster in the tank? You know, if the lobster tries to climb out of the tank, all the other lobsters will try and pull him back down. And that's what it's like. Living in areas like this, if you try to better yourself – for want of a better word of describing it – you'll be mocked.

Interpretative phenomenological analysis methodologically explores ways in which research subjects interpret and make sense of their personal and social worlds (Ritchie and Lewis, 2003).

Analysis of the Data

The eight women who took part in the study were recruited through the Dillon's Cross Project. Five of the women were relatives of prisoners or ex-prisoners and three were working at the centre in advisory and educational roles. In-person interviews, conducted by members of the AONTAS Research Team took place at The Glen Resource Centre in Cork in November 2021, over a two-day period. Interview questions were piloted in advance with a member of staff at the centre and amendments were made on recommendation.

Participation in the research was voluntary and each of the women signed a consent form in advance. Those affected by imprisonment are considered a hard-to-reach population for research, given the societal stigma they are often subject to. They may be unwilling to identify themselves as such and/or unwilling to disclose socially and criminally deviant behaviour (Ellard-Gray, 2015). Purposive sampling was the chosen sampling technique in this research, as it allows for the researcher to be flexible and recursive throughout the process, as required when researching a hard-to-reach population (Bonevski et al., 2014).

The staff in the Dillon's Cross Project acted as gatekeepers and selected an appropriate and diverse sample of respondents for interview. Interviews were recorded using a voice recorder, with the prior consent of participants. Anonymity was maintained through the use of pseudonyms and all identifying data was omitted from the text. Throughout the article, interview participants are to by number such as 'learner one' or 'service provider three'. Interviews were transcribed by members of the research team and analysed thereafter. In

preparation for the analysis, each member of the team read the transcripts to familiarise themselves with the data. In the subsequent reads the team began note-taking and developing themes, which were then marked and named. The main themes to emerge pertained to the respondents' former and current experiences and, in particular, their family backgrounds, including complex family relationships, early experiences of hardship and disadvantage, the effects and implications of imprisonment, trauma, and mental ill-health on their lives and the lives of the local community, the role of the prison system and their experiences of engaging with local support services, including the Dillon's Cross Project, and the resources needed to consolidate and strengthen the project.

Findings

Barriers to Accessing Education

Intergenerational experiences of imprisonment among communities are compounded by family breakdown, low levels of education and employment attainment, social stigma and isolation, a lack of resources and poverty, trauma and addiction (Day et al, 2011; Naser et al, 2006; Binswanger et al, 2011). The extent of disadvantage and marginalisation linking to intergenerational experiences of imprisonment is evident in the accounts provided by both the women accessing the Dillon's Cross Project and the service providers and reflects what learner three describes above as a 'vicious cycle'.

Learner one highlights the enforced poverty of being a lone parent with inadequate childcare support and a partner in prison, and how the silent shame of imprisonment impacts on her children:

I had to quit my job because he [her partner] used to collect [their child] from school...I think they do know now [their father is in prison]...However, none of them have actually asked me about...I think as a result of it, my son, he definitely has anxiety and an attachment to me...it's very upsetting because I feel like he's angry with his dad because his dad just disappeared and he doesn't understand why dad disappeared.

The stories of prison appeared to act as a protective factor with regards to trauma experienced by several of the women, as it was deemed to serve as a haven from the chaos of the world on the outside. As learner two shared, 'Even when he [father] was in prison, I felt he was safer, as long as he wasn't out'. While prison was seen by some learners as a sanctuary for their loved ones, it was also seen to exacerbate addiction, mental health issues, and family destabilisation which in turn feeds recidivism, the poverty trap, and intergenerational imprisonment. As service provider one outlines:

My experience is that it is social disadvantage, negative experience with education...difficulties in the family or home environment...and families not having

enough, not having enough of a support system in place...the trauma, the suicides, the deaths in the family. I would struggle losing one family member, but the girls here would have lost a child, kids, partners, it's awful, it's just awful, and I don't think people appreciate that, the trauma leading to the whole incarceration piece...kind of a vicious cycle.

If these interlinking, compounding social issues become a prolonged collective experience, as seen in areas such as where the Dillon's Cross Project is situated, the identities of the individuals within affected communities are shaped and reinforced through self-fulfilling narratives (Rose et al., 2003). Learner two describes how collective shame among the youth of this community manifests through the normalisation of crime and prison, anticipating exclusion from wider society:

It's frightening now I suppose because when brother was growing up, a 13 year old going into prison; he would have left school, it was disgraceful and shameful, and that was only 15 years ago like but even then, with drugs or even attacking someone, was frightening. Now it's like a trend.

So powerful are these narratives that when the community affected perceive someone from within their group attempting to leave it, they react in fear and anger at the individual. Several of the interviewees provided examples of the collective reaction to a person trying to break away from the fatalistic collective identity. Learner one described the threatened reactions of those in her community in response to her attempts at breaking the cycle of intergenerational poverty and family imprisonment by pursuing education:

Even my own experience, that I say I go to college is like, 'who does your one think she is', 'she thinks she is better than everyone else' – I get that too. I've gotten to the point where I don't even tell.... I don't. I don't even tell that I got a manager role in (*name of organisation*) because if I did, they would be saying, 'oh, your one, she has notions'. That's very much the attitude.

According to service provider two, 'it is social disadvantage, negative experience with education and families not having enough', which in turn leads to a distrust in service providers, wider social and economic marginalisation, education inequality and links to the prison system. Experiencing these multiple, interlinking and compounding issues on a daily basis impacts an individual's capacity to pursue an education, being forced instead to try to survive the under-resourced and often chaotic environment around them. As learner one points out, 'I kind of grew up around poverty and I grew up around people... who weren't putting a lot of importance on education'. Learner three shares how her desire to pursue an education cannot be realised without adequate childcare provision, describing how this traps her and her children in a cycle of poverty:

I wanted to go on further, to go on with that education in catering but obviously I can't cos I have the kids. So you know, you have childminding and I had no one to mind the kids so I couldn't do that like. I couldn't go on to further my education. Am I going to be on the dole now for the rest of my life and my kids are living from hand to mouth and that's it. That's the way we live.

In the accounts of the women and the service providers was the understanding that when educational opportunities are limited due to a lack of opportunity and support to pursue education, there is a high probability that family members, particularly younger members, will experience similar educational setbacks with inevitable long-term implications.

Impact of the Education Support Service on Service Users

While the analysis of the interviews explores the women's self-reported experiences with family members' imprisonment, the main purpose of the interviews was to investigate the value of the education service in the women's own words. As such, the following section focuses on how the interviewees have described their engagement with the education service and how they have conceptualised its role in their lives. During the interviews, participants were asked how taking part in the project had impacted their lives.

Interviewees described the benefits of the education service on their lives in a myriad of ways, extending beyond the purely educational and often revealing a strong relational component to the reported benefits. Participating in the programme was seen to yield significant financial, emotional, interpersonal and psychological benefits, in addition to the qualifications obtained through completion of the courses offered.

In terms of educational benefits, participants described the attainment of qualifications and certificates, as well as the development of knowledge that could be applied in everyday situations. A number of the participants described how obtaining a certificate encouraged them to pursue education to third level. As the comments from interviewees reveal, this takes on a particular personal significance in the context of intergenerational educational disadvantage and early school-leaving. As one learner explained, 'I'm still going and I'm not stopping. I'm a big advocate for education. I'm doing my degree in (*college in Dublin*)'.

Another learner explained:

I've got my degree done. A bachelor's degree done. That was my biggest achievement now. Thought I'd never do that.

As the section on barriers to educational access detailed, many of the women who participate in the Dillon's Cross Project have been impacted by intergenerational poverty, trauma, addiction, and educational disadvantage. A number of the learners felt that being part of the learning community at Dillon's Cross helped to intervene in this intergenerational disadvantage. One woman explained:

Having the right people in your life and the right supports – that is what community education programmes can do for people. A lot of these people – without generalising – wouldn't have had that. I know, I live in a disadvantaged area and I see it. You know, its generation after generation. It is generational. It is the poverty trap and they call it a trap for a reason. It's hard to get out of it. It's very hard to get out of it and if we can help people in any kind of way – like we can say to people that we maybe can't give you the exit, but we can give you the path to the exit and I feel that is what education is.

In this case, it was not only the job prospects and earning potential associated with educational qualifications that helped women to escape the 'trap' of intergenerational poverty, but having access to the 'right people' and supportive relational network of the Dillon's Cross Project. Another learner explained how taking part in the project was of benefit to her specifically because of the good example she would set to her children, in turn helping them to escape from intergenerational poverty:

If you can further yourself with education, you can get a decent job, that pays well and your kids are watching that as well – that you're going out, trying to work, you're setting an example for your kids, to go out and work and make your money and make your way in life.

Another participant echoed this, stating, 'Children learn by following examples, don't they? They see their mother going out there, trying to do something with her life'.

The project was also viewed as fostering a sense of personal empowerment for the women taking part and was seen to have far-reaching effects on their wider lives. One woman explained how 'it can literally redirect a person's entire life', while another participant shared that 'female empowerment is how I described it in my project for college. I just love it – the support and the encouragement'.

Some of the most notable benefits to the women were relational and psychological, with interviewees describing how the service had provided a crucial support network and source

of social connection for them. It was important to the women that the environment of the Dillon's Cross Project was not exclusively focused on academic achievement, but instead provided a space for connecting with others, having fun, or talking about the week's events and processing any difficult life experiences. As one woman shared:

It's not just coming down and go straight into schoolwork, like. You would have your social conversation, and your meet and greet, she [the tutor] would ease you into everything. She would calm you with everything.

Attending the Dillon's Cross Project was seen to have a mitigating effect on isolation, something single mothers with young children are at risk of. One woman explained, 'I would recommend these courses to anyone like, especially single mothers at home. It's definitely for social reasons so like, you know, socialising'. The social and psychological benefits of the project to single mothers in particular were articulated by another interviewee, who stated:

I recommend it to all my neighbours, especially the mothers like, that have kids in school and stuff...They're only waiting for their kids to go into school and then they'll put their names down to go into this and carry on doing it for the mental side of it as well, do you know? Get out of the house, you know?

Taking part in the courses and being in the social space of The Glen Resource Centre was also a self-care method for some of the learners, offering them time and space away from the demands of parenting and a chance to nurture their own interests and needs. As one woman noted, 'And I would have gotten that break away from (*name of son*) – not that I wanted that – but my own space and time again, that I was looking after myself'. These relational benefits were seen not only among the women themselves, but extended into their wider lives, including their immediate and wider families and social circles. Some of the women described improved relationships with their children, for example, with one woman noting, 'I started talking to everybody. Very friendly. And it actually helped me with my daughter believe it or not, helping her with her homework, with her maths and that'.

The impact of taking part in community education more broadly on women's sense of self-confidence was further observed. One participant noted of her mother, 'My mam as well wouldn't have gone to school. She loved these little training courses, these part-time courses you can come to, especially for the socialising, getting out for the break. She would come back with great confidence'. Another interviewee noted how the course she had taken had increased her own confidence and instilled in her a sense of ambition, which was new for her: 'I suppose that's what it did for me, opened up the door for me to have ambitions. I never had ambitions. I wasn't ambitious'.

Women further highlighted the impact of the service on their relationships with others, specifically their children. One participant described how taking part in the project enabled her to model positive behaviour to her daughter:

She's actually doing so well in school now compared to how she used to be before I started going to college. She can see, 'oh, Mam is doing it now as well, I can start concentrating a bit more' and its great. It actually feels so good.

In the women's own words, the service had an impact on their wider lives, including their job prospects, ability to be financially independent, ability to set a positive example for their children, and, crucially, strengthened their social connections, which was an important support for their mental health.

Resources Needed

As highlighted in the barriers section of this analysis, structural, communal and individual factors impacting on those family members and loved ones affected by imprisonment are multifaceted and compounding. The impact of the Dillon's Cross Project outlined in this analysis demonstrates the far-reaching benefits for those engaging in the service. In this section of the analysis, the suggestions regarding the support needed come from the women interviewed, which demonstrates learner voice in action. The service providers interviewed contribute significantly to these recommendations. As people who are working on the ground, gaining an insight into the women's lived realities while also understanding the larger contexts in which the Dillon's Cross Project is situated, their opinions and suggestions are worthy of analysis. This section will highlight what resources are already in place in the project that need to continue, to expand, and to ensure their survival within the future of the service delivery. This section will also highlight what the interview respondents believe the service needs in terms of additional resources.

Service provider two explained how the safe, understanding, and confidential environment of a service enables learners to continually engage:

Trust. That's another big part of it, them being comfortable. And because we are affiliated with the prison, you know, that they know that they can come and that it's a safe space so if they wanted to discuss anything like that. That's its confidential and it's all safe.

Given the chaotic environments many of the learners are coming from, service providers shared how important it is to have wrap around provision in one place from a service where that trust is already established for those accessing the service. As service provider one said:

The first thing is a listening ear and the social support. Some place for them to come in and just to talk, to explain what's going on in their world. That then usually leads onto the other supports that are then needed; whether support for mental health; whether its addiction counselling; advice for what to do with their kids that are

causing trouble at home; whether it's small babies or breast feeding, it just goes on and on and on...

The learners interviewed spoke of the counselling provided to them at the Dillon's Cross Project as a lifeline and shared their hope that many more could avail of the service. Learner one shared:

I'm a big advocate for counselling... I think everyone should be in counselling, even just to have a chat once a week.

Similarly, learner three shared the impact of that level of psychological support on her sense of self:

The counsellor helped me a lot because I had a lot of issues myself, like, I thought there was something wrong with me and I discovered at the time there was nothing wrong with me like. I'm just a single mother struggling. That helped with my confidence.

The staff acknowledged, however, their own limitations when it comes to the women's mental health and made a case for extra support in terms of counselling or specialised mental health support to be put in place in the centre so that anyone coming to learn can also avail of this. As service provider two said:

So we need a whole support network around us so we – you know, their mental health or their counselling – all of those kinds of supports being put in place cos, you know, issues come up every day and sometimes, they're way above what we know how to deal with and its never the same issue...it's like they are big and they are massive, especially in today's society with anxiety levels and depression and all those kinds of things so they're all there all the time so any support that can help with those is always, is always welcome.

Support at the Dillon's Cross Project has extended far beyond the educational skills realm and has been, at times, able to provide a broader range of services to learners which, in turn, benefits their families and their wider community. Service provider one shared the rationale for these additional supports to be reinstated:

For a while, [one of] our tutors was a nurse. She's not working with us this year but it was wonderful to have her because she would be able to talk from a medical background. I remember...one of her biggest successes she talked about was getting the mums to stop putting Coke in bottles and to breastfeed and to explain how important it is to breastfeed.

Acknowledging that the issues facing learners of the Dillon's Cross Project do not disappear at the end of the week, and that weekends can present an increased vulnerability for people, service provider one makes the case for the service to be open for longer periods during times of centre closure, such as at the weekends and during holidays:

I always maintain that Saturday and Sunday have a different meaning if you are busy between Monday and Friday but if that Monday and Friday, if you are in your jammies all day long then, you know, the Monday and the Saturday, there is little difference and that's where the whole mental health and depression sets in so that's – there's a whole load of things we can't do but with more staffing, more resources, we could do an awful lot more.

In addition to increased opening hours, more staff are needed to support learners who may not have the capacity to go on to further education but are still in need of support from the project:

The women who would have completed phase one and phase two with us and may not be interested in going onto further education or higher education still need a lot of support and they could come in the afternoons and just do a craft class with a teacher here, again, with the thinking that, the more we can support the mother, the more that feeds into the family afterwards.

Service providers spoke about the hidden costs for learners accessing both the Dillon's Cross Project and those who progress onto further or higher education. As service provider two indicated:

To get the women to come here in the first place, we need to have things like transport in place. Childcare is a huge thing we need to have in place for them.

The project tries to provide funding to address these costs to ensure those who access the Dillon's Cross Project can pursue further or higher education after they complete the programme. Service provider one highlights the financial limits of the Dillon's Cross Project in meeting these needs, however, and explained how it must rely on working arrangements with other charities that can support and supplement these costs for learners:

It could be buying the uniform...it could be books. If we could pick up those costs, we will try and do that for them...Another student is gone on to...higher education, to do a business degree. The Sisters of Mercy are paying for that.

The service providers also spoke of acting as an additional support for learners, specifically taking on the role of academic mentors, in the case of learners who have moved onto third level. This is crucial for the success of the learners who have already developed trust with the Dillon's Cross Project staff. Their academic progression is supplemented and strengthened by the continuum of care offered by the Dillon's Cross Project staff. As service provider one shared:

I think it's really important that we don't duplicate the work of the further education colleges but just work to support our students if they go on to do a level 5, that we would be available to help them with their modules, with the submissions, or do tutoring here in the afternoon...that we're not doing what the other colleges are doing and just wasting resources.

This additional support offered from the Dillon's Cross Project is under-resourced, however. service provider one makes a case for expanding this service:

And if they are attending the Dillon's Cross Project with us, they will have a mentor in place that could work with them, if they want to go onto further education. Generally speaking, [name of staff member] does trojan work here but it's really difficult to support – we have a girl this year who's gone on to do a third-level course but she really would like the support... [to] check in with her on a weekly basis, if she needed tutoring, and we are trying to put those supports in place, but the more staff we have, the more supports we could put in place for her. Especially those who are moving on to try break the cycle. This woman is adamant she is going to get her own degree and her own qualifications.

Evident in the accounts of the women and the service providers was the understanding that, when educational opportunities and support are offered to people in communities such as where the Dillon's Cross Project is situated, there is a high probability that the cycle of poverty, deprivation and imprisonment can be broken, which will carry down to the younger generations. For this to happen, as stated by those interviewed as part of this research project, services such as the Dillon's Cross Project, which already has an established, trusted reputation in that community, need to be well resourced.

Discussion

Using a qualitative design, nine semi-structured interviews with the service providers and women accessing the Dillon's Cross Project present a picture of multi-layered and interrelated barriers to participating in education for residents of the community where the Dillon's Cross Project is situated who are affected by imprisonment. While the findings are not generalisable, it is reasonable to suggest that participants' experiences could be applied to a broader context of communities impacted by imprisonment in Ireland. The narratives of those interviewed summarise how individual, community-based and structural barriers to education exist in a complex, interlinked relationship. Individual barriers include mental wellbeing and family relationships. Community-based barriers include collective shame and stigma. Structural barriers include a failure to adequately resource supports, such as childcare, and services, which leads to inconsistency in service provision.

While acknowledging it can be a relief for family, children, and communities that an individual is going to prison, the effects of having a parent or loved one in prison results in the loss of social capital (Rose et al., 2003). Social capital is described as, 'a by-product of social relationships that provides the capacity for collective understanding and action' (Rose et al., 2003: 185). Social capital can support communities by bolstering collective values, trust, safety, reciprocal relationships, and belonging. When entire communities are affected by the imprisonment of a significant number of its residents, the collective shame experienced can erode the social capital of these communities (Fisherman, 1990). Those interviewed noted the impact of this shame on their peers in the community and expressed considerable empathy for those who attempt to manage their family life through the silent shame of imprisonment of their loved ones, sharing their hopes that other women in their community could pursue a different life for their families through education.

Prison and crime can be highly emotive topics within political discourse and can, in turn, influence society's view of certain geographical areas politically associated with crime and disadvantage. It can impact on the employment prospects of those living in such areas and affect how staff in services, teachers in school, and medical professionals treat those they

view as inhabitants of areas of crime and social disadvantage, and subsequently see these residents as undeserving of respect and equal opportunity (Howerton et al., 2007).

Furthermore, the stigma of imprisonment can exacerbate financial difficulties and social isolation for families, as stigma can lead people to think that it is their fault for being locked in a cycle of poverty and disadvantage. As AONTAS' 2023 research report on Lifelong Learning Participation in Ireland highlighted, those impacted by imprisonment face pervasive stigma which has been linked to recidivism, as employment and educational opportunities are reduced (AONTAS, 2023). Elaborating on the ways in which societal stigma can manifest, Durnescu (2019) posits that a sense of fatalism is created, which both disconnects the affected individual from various social elements in the community and emphasises the phenomenon of 'learned helplessness,' which is rooted in low self-worth and the fear that one will always fail. Interview respondents described how this fatalism among the youth of this community manifests in the normalisation of crime and prison, and results in anticipated exclusion from wider society.

Enablers: Peer Support, Family Support

Conversely, having the experience of being treated with respect by a service professional, and having positive peer and family support increases the likelihood of individuals within the criminal justice system trusting services, teachers, and professionals, and having the self-worth to begin seeking out support (Howerton et al., 2007). Wincup (2019) posits that peer support is an innovative way to address social exclusion as it can provide a bridge to enhanced social capital for the recipients of positive peer support. International research highlights that participants receiving peer support enabled those affected by the criminal justice system to bridge a gap with services and build trust in professionals such as social workers and teachers (Schinkel and Whyte, 2012; Wincup, 2019). Service providers and learners of the Dillon's Cross Project acknowledged the importance of promoting agency among those using the project, and described the empowerment experienced by the women as they are treated with respect in an inclusive environment. Service provider two said:

When they come here, the learning is much more on their terms...the QQI would be way more engaging for people who can work at their own pace. So, from that point of view, they can take on what works for them and we just help them through the process so then they see education from a whole different point of view.

When asked what she hopes will come out of her interview as part of this research project, learner five shared that she had a positive experience taking part in the Dillon's Cross project, and expressed a wish to support women who are considering accessing the service:

I'm kind of hoping that more people will not be so shy to - or not be afraid to come back to education or feel like...like most people would be too shy or think that people would judge them because it has to do with the prison.

Enablers: Trust and Respect

Service provider two elaborates on the impact the Dillon's Cross Project engagement has on those who engage in the programme, where tutors support those affected by imprisonment to develop a culture wherein the individual feels listened to and respected. This, in turn, helps to address stigma and promote positive attitudes to education which can in turn help to break the cycle of intergenerational disadvantage and crime:

Then they start passing that down to their kids and then you have a whole intergenerational effect and we are really starting to see that...A lot of them would have young kids and they'd say, 'oh, once they get their homework and put the housecoats on and I've made the fresh soup' and you're going, 'oh my god like, 6 months ago, this would never have happened.' So you are going, 'they're giving a real positive experience for the kids for their education', which is really, really good because then you will break the cycle, hopefully, and the kids will have a much more positive experience.

Barriers: Hidden Costs and Limited Resources

A family's finances can be drained when running a home without the support of the father who is in prison. This, in turn, contributes to intergenerational poverty and subsequent crime in order to survive (Breen, 2008). Those women interviewed are effectively raising their children alone and could be considered as lone parents. The European Commission 2023 Country Report on Ireland stated that the at-risk of poverty or social exclusion rate for lone parents is triple that of the general population. The report highlights that Ireland's employment rate for lone parents is the second lowest in Europe (European Commission, 2023). Supporting these statistical findings, the theme of exclusion emerged in the interviews, with learners and service providers reporting an absence of adequate childcare facilities, affordable and reliable transport, and the hidden costs of attending courses as considerable barriers to pursuing both engagement with the Dillon's Cross Project and further education. Service provider two highlighted that, although the project can support the women to a certain point with the wrap around services it provides, they are very limited due to a lack of resources, which sustains the barriers for the women:

Childcare is really big, so if we can help the women with childcare then they can come in. Transport...we need really big supports there because, while we can get the women to a certain stage, they are – because they've had to deal with so much in their environments - they're very insular in the area where they live and really developing them to go outside their community. Sometimes college courses come up that they would really love to go to and they'd be well able for but they have no car...and they've no one to mind their children and it's so disheartening for them to have the motivation but for them to get that far but them not being able to do it...those kinds of issues are huge.

Those from socioeconomically deprived communities and those who have experiences with the criminal justice system are named as specific target groups in the National Access Plan: A Strategic Action Plan for Equity of Access, Participation and Success in Higher Education 2022-2028. Implementing goal 5.3 of the plan, which aims, 'To expand funding to address the cost of going to college and enable part time study for socioeconomically disadvantaged students from priority groups', could see the financial and logistical barriers named above

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reduced for the women accessing the Dillon's Cross Project (Higher Education Authority, 2022).

Community Education Participation

There are a number of crucial factors which enable the women residents of The Glen in Cork to take part in community education courses. These are: the affordability of the service; the provision of grants and scholarships for further educational pursuits; facilities such as a creche located next to the project; the availability of psychological counselling; and the dedication of the service providers to creating a holistic environment that is tailored to the needs of this particular community. As the interviews illustrate, the Dillon's Cross Project in many ways demonstrably meets the need for a wraparound service with educational, social, and psychological support components for the community in Dillon's Cross. In addition to providing courses which allow women to pursue specialised courses at higher levels, leading up to degree level and beyond, the project offers a social space for women, a sense of routine and structure, life skills instruction, such as money management and culinary classes, and psychological counselling. The project is evidence of how, as Wincup (2019) has described, peer mentoring can help to facilitate identity change in those undergoing addiction treatment, but also, crucially, for those overcoming social exclusion. Additionally, the interviews illustrate the exemplary nature of the project in terms of engendering trust in service providers among disadvantaged groups. As Howerton et al (2007) have explored, setting a positive precedent for respectful interactions between service providers and service users helps to combat mistrust in official services and encourages more help-seeking behaviours among service users.

Wraparound Supports Increasing Lifelong Learning

The statements emerging from the interviews illustrate the importance of integrated, wraparound services for those vulnerable to poverty and educational disadvantage. Crucially, it is the holistic approach to education and associated personal development (such as the development of confidence, the pursuit of personal goals, and the attainment of financial independence), which makes the Dillon's Cross Project successful in terms of impacting women's lives. Crucially, the courses on offer through Dillon's Cross are financially accessible for the learners, with funding provided through Cork Education and Training Board and, on an individual basis, university-level scholarships provided by charities such as the Sisters of Mercy. It is the affordability of the courses, as well as the awareness that women require a holistic service that caters to their emotional and social needs and is not only

focused on academic work, that makes the programme so impactful. As the women's statements illustrate, the Dillon's Cross Project extends significantly beyond providing opportunities to attain educational qualifications; it provides a sense of safety and hope, and facilitates the expression of autonomy and choice, in the lives of women which have been profoundly marked by trauma and instability.

Similar community education projects have been shown to be successful when they are resourced enough to offer holistic, wraparound services that meet the needs of vulnerable communities. One example is the SAOL Project, an addiction rehabilitation day service for women only, based in Dublin and established in 1995. An exemplary service, SAOL offers a range of person-centred and community-based projects for women at various stages of their recovery from drug addiction. SAOL incorporates community development and adult education methods into drug addiction recovery for women impacted by addiction and poverty. A successful project run by SAOL is a two-year training programme called BRIO (Building Recovery Inwards and Outwards): a programme for women who have issues with both addiction and criminality. The programme caters specifically to the needs of women who have experienced imprisonment and criminality, and unites learning with socialising, self-care, creative expression, and on-site childcare. Other projects include: Seeking Safety, a psychoeducational programme that teaches women recovering from trauma and addiction about how to find safety in their environments; UChoose, the SAOL Project aftercare group which offers a range of activities such as yoga, ukulele, and mother and baby groups; Project DAVINA (Domestic Violence/Abuse is Never Acceptable), a programme which pairs women with experience of addiction and domestic violence with peers; and weekend services, which include Sunday lunch/brunch, weekend barbecues, outings, and childcare (SAOL, 2023).

As AONTAS' 2023 research report on Lifelong Learning Participation in Ireland highlighted, there still exist a number of barriers to participation in education for women from marginalised backgrounds such as those who attend the SAOL Project and the Dillon's Cross Project. As the report recommended, a number of these barriers, such as digital poverty and lack of access to childcare, could be ameliorated by increased and/or continued financial resourcing of these projects and their associated wraparound supports. The programmes

themselves are positively regarded by learners who participate, and the mitigation of financial burdens on learners is what enables them to participate in such projects. For example, AONTAS' research with women affected by addiction as part of the Lifelong Learning Participation project (2023) highlighted the need for tailored supports and the need to reduce financial burdens in order to increase lifelong learning participation for such groups (AONTAS, 2023, 15).

The following are some key findings which have arisen from the Dillon's Cross Project participants' statements on the impact of the project on their lives:

- Taking part in an educational programme can be financially and psychologically challenging for people from marginalised backgrounds, particularly where there is intergenerational poverty, addiction, education disadvantage, imprisonment, and trauma
- Taking part in the Dillon's Cross Project helps to break cycles of intergenerational poverty and trauma, by providing parents with support and helping them to become role models for their own children
- Building social connections with staff and peers through the programme is crucial to learner retention and completion of the courses
- The provision of local affordable or free childcare is of crucial importance, as otherwise, participation in education programmes by single mothers is often impossible
- The provision of financial support in the form of grants covering third level college fees is crucial in order to establish viable pathways for women to continue their education to higher QQI levels
- In the interviews with adult learners, the value of the project is understood primarily in psychological and emotional terms, more so than terms of its impact on future employability and earning potential; having a place to go where the women feel welcomed is crucial
- The most valuable aspects of the project, according to the women who take part, can be sustained through continued financing of the Dillon's Cross Project and other

similar community education projects that specifically cater to the needs of vulnerable groups.

The research has identified some resourcing issues which impact on the provision of services in the Dillon's Cross Project and explored how addressing these issues could benefit those accessing the project. These explorations came from the perspective of those whose family members and loved ones have been affected by imprisonment and from those working within the field. While acknowledging that structural inequities often cannot be overcome by individual action and choice alone, focusing on and developing participants' sense of belonging, and their confidence and self-worth, strengthened their capacity for pursuing their education.

While it was evident from the research findings that the impact on those accessing the Dillon's Cross Project, and on their families, was hugely beneficial, service providers in particular highlighted a clear need for the support and provisions to be expanded and secured. This expansion and consistency in service provision, they advised, would ensure that supports to those accessing the service would be sustained, and it would ensure that anyone who wants to access it from the community could do so.

The Dillon's Cross Project: A Healing Space

Past and recurring traumatic experiences, which were highlighted by several service providers and learners, can impact on the brain's ability to learn, concentrate and retain information (Gross, 2019). In addition, these disadvantaging factors have been found to impair the quality of the educational experience. As highlighted by service provider one, 'the trauma leading to the whole incarceration piece,' can be recurring for the women. Some of the women, for example, described the recent deaths by suicide or drug overdoses of family members, and yet, they continue to come to the Dillon's Cross Project. The benefits of adult learning in terms of psychological wellbeing were expressed by a number of the women, among them learners who cited the importance of a sense of community, friendship, routine, and personal development as integral to their wellbeing. Thus, despite various instances of retraumatisation experienced by learners navigating the prison system, supporting family members in active addiction, suffering from mental ill health, and often

living in poverty, community education was characterised as providing a healing space for those who had suffered adverse life experiences.

Increased Funding for Mental Health and Wellbeing Service Provision

As crucial as the engagement in the project is for the women accessing it, the need for additional psychological intervention by qualified mental health practitioners was cited by service providers. The service providers interviewed highlighted their limits in this area and called for, 'more funding and supports in place for things like, with mental health, with counselling, staffing, educational psychologist type of staffing – access to those, access to addiction counsellors,' which should be sustained and continuous to offer learners the best chance of achieving their learning goals. Sláintecare is a 10 year action plan, led by the Department of Health, and supported by the Programme for Government 2020: Our Shared Future, regarding healthcare for people in Ireland which aims to 'ensure that, in future, everyone has access to an affordable, universal, single-tier healthcare system, in which patients are treated promptly on the basis of need, rather than ability to pay' (DOH, 2017: 4). As those accessing the Dillon's Cross Project are considered socially excluded, and therefore experience greater difficulties accessing healthcare than the general population, they are a priority group under Sláintecare Implementation Plan 2021-2023. Fully implementing the Sláintecare reforms has the potential to increase the accessibility of mental health care in the form of counselling for socially excluded groups, thereby increasing learners' chances of progressing through their educational journeys. Service providers highlighted the need for learners who have progressed onto higher education to have access to a tutor from the project to act as an academic mentor to support them in their new educational arena. Having positive role models who can facilitate academic support while also empathising with their emotional and psychological issues named in this report is vital for some of the participants. This mentorship however is under resourced, according to service providers, who stated that the project overall is understaffed. Securing funding for this endeavour would meet Goal 5.2 of the National Access Plan which aims, 'To sustain funding and develop initiatives and activities that involve Higher Education and community partnerships, funded through time-limited programmes'(Higher Education Authority, 2022). Additionally, service providers stated that with more staff allocated to the Dillon's Cross Project, the service provision could be

expanded to offer a place for learners to come at weekends and other periods of closure such as holidays. The weekends are a vulnerable time for the women, according to service providers, where there is little structure and increased isolation for participants, 'where the whole mental health and depression sets in.'

Conclusion

The individual and structural barriers which impact those living in communities affected by imprisonment were a common theme in the research findings. The interlinking and compounding disadvantages and marginalisation described by the women and the service providers linked to the Dillon's Cross Project had a clear impact on the capacity of those living in that community to engage in education. Also described, however, were the stories of resilience, hope, and empowerment gained through the engagement with and support from the Dillon's Cross Project. Perhaps more meaningful and transformative for the women accessing the project than the QQI certificates gained through participating in courses offered were the additional supports, welcoming atmosphere carefully established within the project, and the relationships that developed through the project. Some of these supports included the mental health and addiction counselling, the peer support mechanisms, and the follow-on mentoring support offered to the women who went onto higher education after completing the programme in the Dillon's Cross Project. The welcoming atmosphere was enhanced by the non-judgemental, understanding, and encouraging staff who showed clear commitment to the project, the women, and the wider community. The interviews described the increase in self-esteem and newfound value the women placed on education resulting from their involvement with the project. The structure, routine and purpose which enhanced the lives of those accessing the service and, as a follow-on, their families and wider community were also an evident impact for these women. As this research indicates, the project adapted itself to the needs of the women in the area who have been historically excluded from education. While there is a dearth of research on the impact of education on the family members, loved ones, and community members of those imprisoned in Ireland, this research project has shown the impact of wrap around, holistic, educational support on those engaging with the Dillon's Cross Project. The barriers to educational participation for women and those communities affected by imprisonment, the impact that engagement with the Dillon's Cross Project had on their lives, in addition to the suggestions made to expand or enhance the project, provide a pathway for policy interventions which will ease burdens on these groups and facilitate their increased participation in lifelong learning.

The narratives provided by the women using the Dillon's Cross Project and those of the staff working on the ground indicate that educational providers who would like to support the inclusion of people affected by imprisonment must implement tailored supports designed to: strengthen peer support; build trusting staff relationships; offer programmes with follow-on, academic mentoring support to learners progressing onto higher education; and offer supports which ameliorate economic burdens of accessing a course such as childcare and transport, and the hidden cost of accessing education.

What emerged from the interviews with the women participating in the Dillon's Cross Project and the education practitioners was that the success of the project was fundamentally relational in nature. The personally transformative aspects of the project were understood and described largely in relational terms, as the women measured their progress in terms of their relationships with themselves and others. Firstly, the accepting and respectful relationships of mutual trust the women formed with the staff at Dillon's Cross provided a corrective or healing experience for many of the women, helping to reframe prior negative or exclusionary experiences both in education and with figures of authority more generally. Secondly, the peer support encouraged as part of the project allowed women to feel considerably less burdened by personal stressors in their lives, such as financial difficulties, and the addiction problems and imprisonment of their family members. Again, the relationships that were formed and sustained through the project were foundational in creating enough safety such that the women were able to shift their identities to encompass educational achievement and academic success. Finally, a number of the women highlighted how the positive relationships they developed through participating in the Dillon's Cross Project transferred into their own wider lives, having a positive impact on their relationships with their own children in particular. All of this illustrates that perhaps the core benefit of the Dillon's Cross Project is the way in which it provides the opportunity for participants to develop new relationships of reciprocity, trust, and safety which can mitigate a legacy of mistrust towards service providers and social exclusion. In order for the service providers to provide such consistent relationships to the women in the Dillon's Cross Project, continued resourcing is required. A more sustainable funding approach would support practitioners' abilities to focus more fully on the education, relational, and emotional components of the project. As such, we recommend

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that the project receive robust financial resourcing, in recognition of the significant burden under-resourcing can place on the service coordinators and learners.

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