**What are the challenges and opportunities for schools in supporting children of people in prison?**

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**Abstract**

Children of people in prison constitute a ‘hidden’ group of children in schools and in education policy documents, yet schools have been identified as playing a key role in the support of these children. A small scale research project examined school leader’s perspectives on the challenges and opportunities that providing this support may bring. Four school leaders; a Head Teacher, a Deputy Head Teacher, a Special Educational Needs Coordinator (SENCO) and an Early Years Phase Leader, employed in different school contexts were interviewed to identify their experiences of working with this vulnerable group of learners. The school leader’s responses suggest that positive relationships between parents, children and staff are key in meeting the needs of children of people in prison and there were many examples of inclusive practice shared. However, the research participants also highlighted a number of challenges both institutionally and nationally which suggests there is still further work to be done to raise awareness and improve support for children of people in prison within education settings and beyond.

**Key words:**

Education, familial imprisonment, relationships, inclusion, partnership

**Introduction**

It is estimated that there are 341,900 children in England and Wales who “are/will be affected by paternal and maternal imprisonment… in 2020” (Kincaid et al, 2019, p.20). It is most likely that the children who fall in to this group will have experienced the imprisonment of their father since the prison population in the UK is 95% male (Prison Reform Trust, 2018). However, more recently, research by Baldwin and Epstein (2017), Minson (2018) Beresford (2018) and Masson (2019) has specifically looked at the effects of maternal imprisonment on children. Findings repeatedly show that few children remain in the family home when their mother is imprisoned, because the mother is usually the primary carer. Whilst it is acknowledged that outcomes may be adverse for any child experiencing parental imprisonment, having a mother imprisoned may cause additional negative outcomes for the child than having a father imprisoned.

However, despite the significant numbers of children estimated to be experiencing familial imprisonment, largely these children continue to remain a hidden group. It is suggested that schools appear to be unaware of children in their communities who may be affected, or, seemingly, choose not to engage with this as an issue (Shaw, 1992 in Morgan et al., 2013b). Whilst schools remain largely ill-informed as to the children in their communities affected by familial imprisonment, this is not an issue specific to schools but rather, there is a lack of information regarding these children across all agencies and it is well established that there is “no systematic identification of children of prisoners” (Kincaid et al, 2019, p.11) or their needs. The Joint Committee on Human Rights report in relation to children whose mothers are in prison states “it is not clear from the evidence we have received whether women entering prison are always asked whether they have dependent children” (House of Commons and House of Lords, 2019, p.13). Although this report refers to women, it can be assumed that this same oversight can be applied to the children of men in the criminal justice system and despite the system noting “the presence of children at different stages [of their parent’s journey through the criminal justice system] their wellbeing remains in many cases ignored” (Kincaid et al, 2019, p.23). However, it is not to say that people entering into the criminal justice system would disclose this information for fear of their child/ren being taken in to care or other repercussions (Sharff Smith, 2014). Despite being required to do so under the guidance of the European Convention on Human Rights, article 8 and the Bangkok rules, magistrates do not regularly take into account the presence or needs of children in sentencing (Baldwin and Epstein, 2017). There are no official records of children affected by family imprisonment and therefore, schools are not informed by the police or other agencies as a matter of course. This means that it is often the responsibility of the remaining carer to inform the school, however, whether they wish or feel comfortable to do so is another matter. The lack of reliable data on the numbers of children who have a parent in prison is, of course, of great concern to those working in schools and local authorities who must understand the needs of the learners in their care in order to be able to provide the most appropriate support to achieve the best outcomes for the child. In 2007, a joint review considering how to support children of prisoners and their family, the Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCFS) and the Ministry of Justice (MoJ) made strong recommendations to “use parental entry into prison to trigger a process which enables the secure sharing of relevant information between agencies, and systematic assessment and support of the child” (p. 17). However, over ten years later this remains a real issue, so much so that the Joint Committee on Human Rights made the same recommendation in 2019 and stated that “mandatory data collection and publication must be urgently prioritised by the Ministry of Justice” (p.3).

Research consistently shows that “the outcomes for children of prisoners are poor” (DCFS and MoJ, 2007, p9). Whilst having a parent in prison is not proven to be the cause of poorer outcomes, there is a strong correlation between the two affecting the experiences these children have in different areas of their lives, not least in their schooling. It is acknowledged by researchers that “the effects of parental imprisonment on children may differ according to both the child’s and family’s characteristics and the wider social context in which the child lives. However, the experience for the child is generally negative” (DCFS and MoJ, 2007, p6). Whilst much of the research which focuses on parental imprisonment does not differentiate between the impact of a father or mother’s imprisonment on the child “the research available shows that the absence of an imprisoned mother often has a greater impact” (Beresford, 2018, p5). In fact, children and young people in Beresford’s (2018, p7) research said “the experience of having their mother sent to prison is particularly hard. A mother is supposed to be there for her children, so her absence is more unusual and therefore difficult to explain to others.”

It has been established in some research that children of people in prison are more likely to have mental health issues, to suffer emotional distress caused by trauma and therefore exhibit ‘challenging’ behaviour. They are also more likely to be placed in care, experience poverty, homelessness and be absent from and/or excluded from school compared to their peers (DCFS and MoJ, 2007;Murray et al, 2008; Roberts, 2012; Morgan et al, 2013b; PACT, 2018). This coupled with the fact that these children are often an ‘invisible group’ (Kincaid et al, 2019) within our schools means that there are a number of challenges and implications for school staff in providing an inclusive education which meets the needs of all learners. However, with every challenge comes opportunities to tackle these and therefore, schools also have a wide range of opportunities through targeted support to address the needs of all learners in spite of their circumstances.

Given that an estimated 42% of the current prison population were excluded from school (Prison Reform Trust, 2018) and went on to experience social exclusion through being incarcerated, it is vital that all learners are given the opportunity to succeed and be included in school. This is all the more important for the children who it is known are vulnerable and at risk of poor outcomes; children of people in prison for example. It is argued that it is vital that schools, which play a key role in supporting children of people in prison, enable them to experience good outcomes both educationally and personally. It is already known that children of people in prison are also more likely to be at risk of, or are, excluded from school. Therefore, it is hardly surprising that “a landmark study showed that 63% of prisoners’ sons went on to offend themselves” (Farrington et al, 1996, cited in Farmer, 2017, p18). Although simply being a child of a person in prison does not in itself lead to offending behaviour, schools can, and should seek to do all they can to reduce exclusions so that the cycle of potential intergenerational offending which leads to social exclusion (through being incarcerated in prison) might also start to decline. Schools would be in a better position to do this by understanding and addressing the needs of children of people in prison at an early stage so that they are included.

The Farmer review (2017) highlights the importance of maintaining family ties for offenders and their families as this has been shown to have a significant impact on reducing reoffending and improving rehabilitation for the prisoner. There can also be benefits in maintaining family relationships for the child/ren as well as the prisoner themselves. Children of people in prison and their families may experience their family member’s imprisonment in the same way as they might a bereavement and may suffer insecure or disrupted attachment with caregivers (Masson, 2019, Booth, 2020). Doka (1989, cited in Roberts, 2012), and Minson (2018) refer to prisoners’ families feeling ‘disenfranchised grief’ because they may feel they cannot openly acknowledge that the person is gone due to the stigma and embarrassment attached to this. Schools have opportunities to tackle the stigma associated with having a family member in prison and can “actively seek to reduce [this] by incorporating issues around prison, crime, blame and punishment into the curriculum” (Roberts, 2012, p25). In addition, Roberts (2012) believes that schools can play a key role in supporting the maintenance of family relationships by continuing to include and engage parents who are in prison in their child’s education. She argues that “in order for any relationship with a child to be truly meaningful it must include his or her school life… [as that is] so much of who they are” (Roberts, 2012, p7). For most children, having the ability, and support, to maintain a relationship with their parent in prison will be important and will have an impact on their emotional well-being. However, it should also be noted that there will be some children for whom contact with their imprisoned parent is not beneficial “…if the parent has been particularly anti-social, violent or disruptive in the home” (Murray et al, 2012, p179). In some circumstances the nature of their parent’s crime/s and behaviour prior to imprisonment could compromise the child’s safety and emotional well-being and maintaining relationships in this instance may be detrimental. In addition, it may not be possible for the child to visit their imprisoned parent due to the logistical and financial implications involved in prison visits; this is particularly so for a child whose mother is in prison as there are only twelve women’s prisons located in England and none in Wales (Beresford, 2018, Booth, 2020). If visits are possible, these may not be wholly positive experiences for the child; Moran (2013) highlights how the ‘liminal’ space of prison visits draws in the children and families of prisoners, temporarily making them not quite a prisoner, but not quite free either. Moran (2013) suggests that ‘secondary prisonisation’ occurs and thus visitors, i.e. children experience the same shame and stigma felt by the prisoner. Whilst it can be argued that it is not having a parent in prison per se that may cause the child to be vulnerable, the children who are affected by imprisonment are often vulnerable due to a range of factors existing before, during and after their parent’s imprisonment. Furthermore, children with a close relative in prison are susceptible to bullying and associated stigma in school (Baldwin and Epstein 2017, Beresford 2018). Therefore, it is for these reasons that schools should be aware of these learners and do all they can to support them.

**Research Methodology**

Despite the rise in attention that children of people in prison are now receiving, there is still a relatively small amount of research which focuses on the impact of familial imprisonment on ***school*** outcomes and experience and also on what schools can do, or are doing, to support this group (Roberts, 2012). In order to develop a better understanding of some of the challenges and opportunities schools face in supporting children of people in prison, a small scale research project was carried out in 2018. Semi structured interviews were conducted with members of the Senior Leadership Team (SLT) from three different school contexts, all of whom had some teaching responsibility alongside their strategic leadership roles. School leaders were chosen as research participants in order to explore the issue with those who had an oversight of the policy and practice in the setting as a whole rather than from the perspective of class teachers who may have had a narrower view of how things are. The participants were secured via volunteer sampling and responded to a request from the researcher to take part. Volunteer sampling was necessary as it was not possible to access schools (and its senior leaders) easily due to safeguarding. Safeguarding is statutory guidance for schools which seeks to prevent maltreatment or harm to children and means that all adults entering schools for work or research purposes must have a disclosure and barring service (DBS) check and where possible; be known to the school. From those who responded to the research call, research participants who held leadership positions in different educational contexts/locations were selected with a view to providing a broad picture of the issue across the range of education settings for pupils of statutory school age. The Participants were as follows; the Early Years Phase Leader from school A - a state maintained mainstream primary school in London, the Head Teacher and Deputy Head Teacher from school B – an independent special secondary school for students experiencing social, emotional and behavioural difficulties (SEBD) in London and the Special Educational Needs Coordinator (SENCO) from School C - a mainstream secondary school within a Multi Academy Trust (MAT) in Brighton. It is important to note that the findings from this research cannot be generalised due to the small scale nature of the study, however, it could be argued that the opinions of the small sample of school leaders may be indicative of the experiences of school leaders in other similar contexts. The interviews were analysed using thematic data analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006 cited in Silverman, 2006), transcribed then coded with the use of the computer software Nvivo in order to organise the data into the challenges and opportunities the participants identified. What follows is a discussion of some of the findings from this research in relation to wider literature in the field.

**Research Findings: Challenges for schools**

*Raising awareness and knowing which pupils are affected by familial imprisonment*

Since there is a limited (but growing) body of research into children of people in prison and limited reference to this group in education policy, inevitably “children of prisoners all too often constitute a hidden population in schools too” (Morgan et al, 2013b, p201). This presents an issue; if schools are unaware of the children affected then it is likely that they are also unaware of the issues they face and the right kind of support to mitigate for these issues may not be on offer. In fact many of the teachers who took part in research with Morgan et al (2013b) and PACT (2018) said that they did not know if they had any children affected by familial imprisonment in their schools and they were unaware of their needs and how to support them effectively. There could be a number of reasons why schools are unaware of the number of pupils in their community who are affected by familial imprisonment. As previously mentioned, children of prisoners are “not recorded in any official statistic” (Scharff Smith, 2014, p43) and prisoners report inconsistencies regarding whether the prison asks if they have children when they are received into custody (Baldwin and Epstein, 2017, p31). It has been widely reported that prisoners’ families may face stigma, embarrassment and bullying when others in the school (and wider) community find out that they have a family member in prison (Murray et al, 2008; Dallaire et al, 2010; Scharff Smith, 2014; Baldwin and Epstein, 2017); PACT, 2018; Masson, 2019). Such concerns about this may prevent parents and caregivers reporting this information to schools in order to protect the child and family. Schools generally rely on the parent or carer who is not in prison to inform them of the imprisonment of a parent, however, “imprisonment can be perceived as ‘unacceptable’ within communities (including schools)” (Roberts, 2012, p4) so families may feel it is best to keep this information to themselves. Children may feel, or be told that they cannot or should not talk about what has happened and how they feel and may become withdrawn or ‘act in’ presenting behaviour that may be a barrier to their learning. In some cases, parents or carers may feel it best not to tell the child the truth about where their parent has gone which can cause issues later on if their peers are aware of this and/or they find out they have not been told the truth. In O’Keeffe’s (2012) research interviewing primary Head Teachers regarding working with children of people in prison, all of the Head Teachers stated that getting information from parents was a challenge. The Head Teachers also noted the effect that communities can have on the willingness of a parent to share information due to perceptions that they are ‘guilty by association’ or ‘contaminated’ (O’Keeffe, 2012). The school may also find out about imprisonment through the community itself rather than through the families choice, if the case is high profile, in the local media or simply because the person in prison is known in the community. Equally if the case is known in the community this may cause the family not to disclose any information to the school for fear of judgement by the school or others. The Head Teachers in the current study emphasised the importance of good lines of communication between parents and the school so that all parents and carers felt they could share information that was necessary for school staff to work with their child effectively (O’Keeffe, 2012). In addition to possibly facing judgement and perceptions from the school community as a whole, Dallaire et al (2010) found that teachers may have lower expectations of what children of people in prison can achieve compared to other children. PACT (2018, p21) also found that some schools thought that “openly supporting a pupil with a parent in prison would represent a reputational risk to the school.” These kinds of attitudes and judgments clearly present a challenge for children and families of prisoners but also for school leaders in ensuring that they create an inclusive learning community where everyone has the opportunity to thrive without judgement.

What became apparent from the current research interviews was that communication between the parent/carers and school is key in knowing whether pupils had a parent in prison. The participants in this research felt that they were relying on the remaining parent/carer to be willing to provide this information. Of the children in their settings who they knew had a parent in prison, the participants said that for the most part, they were made aware of this because the remaining parent or caregiver had shared this information with them. This is in contrast to other studies suggesting that parents and carers may not wish to disclose this information. This might suggest that the parent/s carers discussed in this study had a positive, trusting relationship with the school and felt able to disclose this information.

All the research participants in this study did however, raise concerns that they felt they did not have the full picture as to the pupils with a parent or other family member/s in prison. The Head Teacher in school B, the special school gave particular emphasis to the fact that no other agencies had informed them if a pupil had a parent in prison and that it was through other means and often by chance, that they discovered this information.

The Head Teacher stated

 “*Sometimes we find out about it if you go to a ‘child in need[[1]](#footnote-1)’ meeting or something. I'm thinking of one of our boys at the moment he isn't and his mum or dad aren't [in prison] but his brother is. And that became apparent at a child in need meeting that his brother wasn't at home. His brother is now gone, had a custodial and that was it.”*

The participants from each school also discussed the wide range of opportunities parents had to communicate with the school, and it was clear that in all three school settings, these lines of communication were very much open. It would be of great value for all schools to replicate the practice of the schools in this study which give clear examples of good practice, especially in terms of developing positive home /school relationships. Although the specifics of how these positive, trusting relationships were achieved varied for each school, the participants each gave examples of parent meetings or home visits as being vital for information sharing. These meetings were valued by the school leaders because it was where they were able to establish a relationship with the family and develop an understanding of the child and their pre-existing needs. Home visits for children entering the school in the Early Years Foundation Stage (Reception class) seemed especially useful for the participant in school A who stated;

*“So I've taught two children that I'm aware of who have had, both of them have had their Dads in prison and the only way that I actually found out was through the parent telling me, the parent openly telling me on a home visit…had Mum not shared that information with me, I wouldn't have known anything, no other agency got into contact with the school, nobody. So it was only through her own need of support and wanting her child to get the right support that she shared that with me. The other child who I didn't teach but was in a parallel class to me, his dad is in prison, and again the only reason we found out was because his Nan told us on the home visit*.”

This example suggests that it would be beneficial for all schools to ask a question relating to family incarceration during home visits or pre-entry meetings; however this would not be relevant to a child who experiences family incarceration at a later stage of their school journey. To support families in feeling able to share this information when relevant; schools should create an environment which encourages positive relationships and open discussions within its community.

All participants said that their school did not keep specific records for ‘children of people in prison’ as a distinct group in the same way they would have a register of pupils with special educational needs (SEN) for example. However, they did discuss the ways they kept and circulated information on their pupils in general. For example, at school A there was a ‘vulnerable book’ which is a place staff can record any concerns they may have about specific children, this is monitored by the Special Educational Needs Co-ordinator (SENCO) and discussed at weekly senior leadership meetings. At school B there were ‘pen portraits’ which are created for every child on joining the school which are shared with staff and include, for example, family background, how the child learns best and triggers for challenging behaviour. Likewise, at school C there is a data tracking system for pupil’s attainment and pastoral care which linked to the School Information Management System (SIMs). The participant from school C stated that if they were aware a child had a parent in prison this would be recorded on the child’s file on SIMs. If schools are able to find ways to ask for and encourage information sharing in a more systematic way (such as those discussed above) then it is also necessary that they record this information in a systematic way. This is so that school staff can access this information and use it to support their pupils to make progress and reach their potential.

However, the participants in this study had differing opinions on which people in school should have access to information about children affected by parental imprisonment. The participant in school A discussed a situation which arose as a result of not sharing information about the incarceration of a child’s father. The child’s father had been released from prison and “*suddenly I remember being out on play duty one day and the Dad stood at the gate with a dog and adults were saying who is that? And there's nobody in the school knew who it was and for that child that could have been very upsetting*.”

In that situation, the participant felt that school did not have the right support in place “*because only limited people know. And I think the problem is in school sometimes the inclusion manager can feel only the teacher should know this. And it's not fair for the child to not share information when actually you're doing a disservice for that child.”*

On the other hand the participant from school C felt quite strongly about “*how and who that information was shared and obviously where you have a disclosure from a parent or carer it's okay because you can talk about you know what mechanisms you would use to communicate that… I don't think it is imperative just because a child's got a family member in prison that* ***everyon****e has to know. I guess it's kind of well child protection kind of considerations I would employ about that. That piece of knowledge would be communicated on a need to know basis.”*

As with any sensitive information about a child or their family, it is important for schools to respect confidentiality and consider who needs to know this information and for what purpose in order that the best interests of the child are met.

*Impact on educational outcomes – behaviour and social, emotional and mental health issues*

Kincaid et al (2019, p12) state that “a substantial body of research highlights the negative effects parental incarceration has on children. Children with a parent in prison are twice as likely compared to other children to experience conduct and mental health problems [and are] less likely to do well at school.” They go on to describe parental incarceration as an Adverse Childhood Experience (ACE) which is a traumatic and stressful event which can go to have a significant negative impact in the child’s later life. It is therefore not unreasonable to expect that the negative impact on a child’s emotional wellbeing will have an impact on their behaviour in school.

In two UK studies carried out by Morgan et al (2013a) and O’Keeffe (2012) it was reported by school staff that there was a noticeable change in behaviour when a parent was imprisoned. Head Teachers interviewed recounted that “[a child] becomes aggressive, verbally…and physically…with the other children, non-cooperative and angry, generally angry about everything and everybody” (Morgan et al, 2013a, p273) and “it could be that they are withdrawn or weep or fall out with their friends” (O’Keeffe, 2012, p25). A view shared by O’Keeffe (2012), Morgan (2013a) and their research participants is that the behaviour will often change but how that manifests will vary from child to child. Similarly, care givers to children of people in prison interviewed in Minson’s (2018, p6) research all described the children they cared for as having “intense emotional needs, far beyond that of a ‘normal’ child of the same age.”

When the participants in this study were asked about their experience of the potential impact of parental imprisonment on the children they have worked with, recurring factors mentioned were behaviour, social emotional and mental health (SEMH) and insecure attachment. All those interviewed discussed several incidents of unusual, challenging or concerning behaviour displayed by the children of people in prison they had taught in their schools.

The participant from school A gave an example of a child in reception whose father was in prison when she described behaviour that would be classed as ‘acting in’. That is, the child inwardly reacts to their experience often becoming withdrawn and reluctant to communicate. In the case of the child at school A, the participant explained that *“Mum let me know all about the background because the boy had become a mute because of [his father’s arrest and subsequent incarceration]. He wasn't speaking because he'd been attacked.”*

However, once the child started speaking again, the mother seemed to be satisfied that her son was making good progress when in fact the child was not meeting the expected levels of attainment in the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS). The participant from school A went on to explain that *“at the time her [mum’s] biggest concern of the whole experience was about his language needs, was the fact that he had stopped talking. And I think once he regained his speech again and was talking it was almost as if her concerns went.”*

Participant A also highlighted that the child’s social and developmental skills had fallen behind and felt this was because *“the family had to move areas and I think they were naturally quite untrusting. I think the child wasn't able to socialise with the other children too much. She [mum] didn't really ever have friends around to play so he found it quite difficult to socialise… I think through protecting him she almost then didn't enable him to kind of have the same freedoms.”*

Likewise the Deputy Head Teacher from school B commented on examples of children becoming withdrawn; “*Particularly with if the [family] member has gone in to prison recently. Then you've got underlying trauma for both the mother and the child and usually the child's quite reactive to that. They're walking around closed down and you think why are they so closed? And it’s because they can't take anymore.”* The participant from school B went onto say that she felt that for some of their pupils, it was easier for them to shut down and ignore the issues at school because in that way they could keep school and home completely separate. She felt that this was a strategy they used in order to be able to function however she said that *“maybe it’s good in many ways if it allows them to thrive but I'm not sure it does really because in many cases they're not thriving are they? in terms of emotional and mental health.”*

These examples highlight the fact that it is imperative for school staff get to know their pupils in order that they can understand and respond to their needs with empathy and compassion.

Attachment theory developed by Bowlby (1969, cited in Murray and Murray, 2010) states that children who have securely attached relationships with their caregivers will generally have a secure base from which to operate and therefore will function well in their environment. In contrast those children, who have insecure or disrupted attachments caused by separation from a caregiver, children of people in prison for example, are more likely to experience negative effects and will find it more of a challenge to function well in their environment. Insecure attachments experienced by children of people in prison may happen between the imprisoned parent as well as the remaining caregiver due to the varied stresses placed on the family during this time (Masson, 2019). Knudsen (2016) maintains that the way a child experiences and reacts to the imprisonment of their parent will heavily depend on the pre imprisonment experiences of family life for that child. She recommends careful thought before assuming that family life prior to imprisonment will have comprised of child/ren living with both parents in a secure and stable unit with no financial concerns and without being witness to any violent or traumatic events including their parent’s arrest. What is known is that insecure attachment generally has detrimental psychological effects on the child; however, Scharff Smith (2014) makes a similar argument to Knudsen (2016) when he says that the scale of the effects on the child will be dependent on the relationship between the child and parent before the separation due to imprisonment. Assuming the child has had a relationship with their parent before they were imprisoned, it is important to understand that this separation can be “particularly traumatic, often leading to a mistrust of authority and feelings of anger that can make engaging in education challenging” (Roberts, 2012, p8). Knowing the negative impact of insecure attachment and relational trauma on children of people in prison presents school staff with a clear obligation to address this. Bomber and Hughes (2013, p9) advocate that the way schools should seek to address these issues is to ensure that they focus on forming quality staff: child relationships. They say that “we know that developing safe and meaningful relationships with a few key adults is central to emotional growth. The same is true for learning…quality relationships provide the necessary vehicles for adaption and recovery”. Bomber (2020) is a firm believer that educationalists, who will all at some point work with a child suffering insecure attachment and relational trauma, must be “attachment aware and trauma responsive”. This means that school staff should seek to develop an environment for all pupils which is relationally rich, provides nurture and gentle challenge, provides sensory interventions and offers relentless care (Bomber, 2020).

Bomber and Hughes (2013, p5) state that of the 8,000 permanent UK school exclusions in 2010 “the majority of these pupils will have experienced or are experiencing significant relational traumas and losses in their own homes”. As previously mentioned there is a well-established link between school exclusion and subsequent criminal behaviour and imprisonment; statistics show that 43% of males in the current prison population were excluded from school (Prison Reform Trust, 2018). It is conceivable then that “a result of parental imprisonment, according to several studies, is an increased risk of later antisocial behaviour and criminalisation among the children” (Scharff Smith, 2014, p74). Whilst parental imprisonment is not necessarily the cause for intergenerational offending, there is certainly a correlation; for example, children of people in prison are overrepresented in young offenders’ institutions (Scharff Smith, 2014). In this research, the participants from school B talked about the fragile nature of children of people in prison’s emotions and stated that staff had to think carefully about any triggers which may cause the child to lose their temper or become upset. They felt that it was sometimes difficult to predict when a child’s behaviour may become explosive in school and it was often after the event through talking to the child that it became clear that what was going on at home that had had an impact.

The Deputy Head Teacher from school B said “*I think with all the trauma and the changes and the different things that happen to them. You never know when it's going to be coming out. It could be in a major meeting, it could be one to one, it could be talking about something really minor and they have a big blow up. You take them away then you can and massage the problem out. And also say they are having a PSHE [Personal, Social, Health Education] lesson or when they're studying these kind of subject areas, it can be upsetting so the staff have to be told, must be warned about all of these issues”.*

The participant from school B clearly demonstrates that in their school, staff take the time to understand and mitigate for situations that may trigger a pupil’s challenging behaviour. They work with the child on ways to move forward rather than chastise. It is not to say that school staff should merely accept unwanted behaviour but as is the case in school B, take the time to understand why that behaviour may be occurring. All schools have a duty to ensure the needs of all pupils are met. Pupils unmet needs can often be expressed through challenging behaviours; hence the most vulnerable learners are the ones who may face school exclusion.

Whilst Bomber and Hughes (2013) refer to the cultivation of positive relationships between staff and children of prisoners in school as being beneficial, there has been much research to show that supporting the maintenance of the relationship between the imprisoned parent and the child has benefits for both as well. As the Farmer review (2017) outlines maintaining family ties can help to reduce reoffending rates for the prisoner and can potentially provide the child with a way to rebuild the insecure attachment they may have experienced. There are a number of programmes within the prison system which seek to support prisoners to maintain and build or re-build family relationships such as, family days and homework clubs (PACT, 2020). In addition, schools have an opportunity to provide support in this area through the way they communicate with and report to parents in prison about their child’s education. School staff can also provide support for the families of people in prison through allowing and encouraging attendance at prison visits (if appropriate) and through reducing the stigma around familial imprisonment so that children feel able to talk about their parent in prison in a safe space if they wish to. As Farmer (2017, p18) states “access to organisations and services that have proven expertise in helping families with members inside prison is vital for guarding children’s future life chances.” Whilst a school’s primary purpose is to provide an education and they may not have expertise in helping prisoner’s families, they can seek advice from and/or provide access to those who do provide this; charities such as Children Heard and Seen, Prison Advice and Care Trust and Families Outside, for example. Roberts (2012, p8) also believes that if a school is able to help foster the child/imprisoned parent relationship “this can go a long way to restoring a child’s trust in authorities as well as reinforcing their belief that their parent can still have important input in their life.” Schools must consider ways in which they can support all pupils to develop and maintain relationships within families but even more so for those children who are experiencing relational trauma and loss.

All the participants in this study were quite clear that they felt the biggest impact on the children of people in prison’s educational outcomes was caused by the emotional and psychological distress and trauma they appeared to have experienced. Participants from school B talked about particular trauma such as domestic violence they knew their pupils had experienced before their parent was taken in to prison. They also talked about behaviour becoming ‘turbulent’ when a parent was due to be released from prison, disrupting their somewhat calm, more ordered life than the one they had before the parent was imprisoned. All participants recognised the trauma caused by separation to some of their pupils when a parent was imprisoned. They all discussed the inevitable difficulties children would have in focusing on their school work whilst going through these emotional struggles.

*Access to Appropriate Resources*

The National Education Union (2019) states that schools are “£2bn a year worse off than they were two years ago. 17,942 schools are having their funding cut.” So it is perhaps not surprising that the issue of a lack of appropriate resources and training to support children of people in prison has been raised in this research. Ultimately, schools are inspected and measured on the academic attainment of their pupils so priorities of leadership teams often lie within subject specific areas. It could be claimed though, that for schools to overlook the importance of good emotional health to learning is a huge oversight. Barnardo’s (2013) highlighted some of these pressures in their handbook for schools working with children of offenders, they stated “Educational priorities such as an emphasis on pupil attainment, school performance and student attendance may also result in staff feeling under pressure and pulled in many directions with not enough time to focus on other issues” (p8). Bomber and Hughes (2013, p9) highlight the same issue and say “the systems we are trying to work within are often traumatised too, because of the extraordinary stress around in schools at this time. Competencies are being questioned. Resources are being cut. Different education agendas are being delivered at a fast pace. Troubled pupils are present in all our classes. Staff to pupil ratios are decreasing.”

The school leaders interviewed each mentioned the importance of having the right resources to support children of people in prison in particular empathic members of staff to whom the children could relate well. However, the leaders from the mainstream schools noted some organisational, structural and systemic challenges to providing this. Participants from the mainstream schools were firm in their belief that children of people in prison needed to build good relationships with key adults in school; that they needed to trust those adults and they needed a consistent person/s to go to when they were having issues. They also emphasised that this adult/adults should have the relevant skill set and training to help support the child to make progress in school.

Both participants from the mainstream schools discussed the somewhat limited availability of this in their schools. The participant from the mainstream primary school A said “*we've got limited resources in school. Because when he [child of person in prison] was with me in reception all I really had to offer was we have a sports coach comes into school. And he takes out groups to do work around team skills and social interaction. And that's really all I have beyond myself and my teaching assistant. But again he's trained in doing team sports and that, but he's not necessarily trained you know in supporting children with these backgrounds.”*

The school leader from the mainstream secondary school C identified the need for time, time to spend with children who have and/or are experiencing trauma and emotional difficulties. She said it was important that there was someone in the school with “*a skill set in house that could actually you know have positive or identifiable impact for that person in the sense of you know a key worker or mentor because it will all be about establishing relationships with that young person. Staff retention could be an issue that I'm very familiar with at the moment.”* The participant from school A, agreed with this and discussed some of the cuts to staffing made in her school in recent years “*Even our work with families has really been reduced which I think is sad. Before we used to have three learning mentors and one of the learning mentor’s roles was purely to work with the families.* *She would be able to do much more, sort of be the middle person to say to us right now the family are going through this and this is what you can do. And now we've lost her; that link has gone. I think it's very hard and sadly you only hear about, you only have meetings with families when things are going really wrong.”*

The participant from school C also discussed the fact that provision and budgets for training in this area would be dependent on what the priorities identified for the whole school were. She said that provision to support children of prisoners would not be improved specifically because “*it's not identified as a school priority - emotional health and well-being”* and therefore, organisational constraints would prevent this being developed.

Whereas, the leaders from school B, the special school, did not cite these organisational, structural and systemic challenges as a particular challenge for them. They made several distinctions between what they were able to provide as a specialist provision compared to what mainstream schools were able to offer. The leaders from school B, through their work in this specialist provision, have developed a level of experience and expertise that staff in mainstream schools will not have been privy to. They work with a range of agencies and draw on a wide range of resources such as police liaison officers and therapists to support their pupils. They were firm in their belief that to support children with behavioural issues is to *“…really surround it and do the whole package. Because in fact in the mainstream school you can't be the whole package unless you get a therapist in, police liaison etc - it’s a lot to ask.”* Support from specialist external agencies such as those described by the special school leaders would be of benefit to pupils in all schools and should therefore be a priority for funding at a national level.

In relation to the findings from this research, it seems that these pressures were considerably more noticeable in the mainstream settings. Staff to pupil ratio in the special school is 1:4 and every child has a key worker. What is interesting is the fact that children attending the special school have been excluded from mainstream schools. To look at this crudely, one could argue that if mainstream schools were able to offer the full complement of intervention and provision the special school can, there would be no need for special schools at all. Vulnerable learners would be accessing the support they needed in a mainstream school and exclusion would be a thing of the past. Of course, this is a somewhat utopian vision but the contrasts between what is on offer in the different settings do seem quite stark.

**Conclusion and summary**

It was apparent from the current research that there is no consistent approach from local authorities and other agencies in reporting to schools about whether their pupils have a parent in prison. This continues to be identified as an issue in recent reports by the Joint Committee on Human Rights (2019) and Crest Advisory (2019). The three schools taking part in this research all had experience of working with children of people in prison and in contrast to the existing literature the majority had known about this via the remaining parent/carer. It was clear that the senior leaders interviewed in this research had a secure understanding of the importance of, and a well-established system, for building good relationships with the children and their families. It could be argued that it was because of the time and trouble the schools took to get to know, not just their pupils but their families as well, that parents felt confident in telling them about their partner’s imprisonment. However, this may not be the case for all parents in the sample schools or indeed for parents in all schools. Given that we know around 300,000 children are affected by parental imprisonment every year, (Kincaid et al 2019), it is important that schools are factored in to the support that should be available to children of people in prison. It is clear, even from this small scale study that current support is offered on an ad hoc basis, if and when schools become aware of children in their school being affected in this way. Therefore, in an issue of this magnitude and complexity; schools need to be supported and guided in how to provide appropriate, reflective and responsive care to children affected by parental imprisonment.

The examples the research sample shared regarding the behaviour of children of prisoners was comparable to findings in other studies by Morgan et al (2013) and O’Keeffe (2012). Changes in behaviour were consistently noted in the interviews for this study as a barrier to learning for children of prisoners. All of the research participants had an awareness of the implications of parental separation on children’s emotional and mental health. It also appeared that the sample were aware of attachment informed practice and already seemed to have specific, albeit different, interventions in place in their schools to address the needs of all children who may have been struggling in this area. Returning to the fact that this is a very small sample, it is difficult to know whether school leaders in all schools would have this awareness and offer this provision and this is something that further research could explore.

Despite constraints the school leaders were working within, they all emphasised the importance of schools taking opportunities to develop strong relationships between vulnerable children, staff and families. They were all very positive when talking about ways of working which focused on building relationships and felt that it was something they would like to continue to develop in order to address the needs of children with a parent in prison. They also talked about the fact that a relationships based approach would benefit all children, not just those with a parent in prison.

These findings show that the school leaders in the sample had some concerns over the provision they could offer to children of people in prison or in fact any child who may be experiencing social, emotional or mental health difficulties. This was particularly apparent in the interviews with leaders from the mainstream schools although all participants were in agreement that key workers or mentors were of benefit to children of prisoners. The importance of positive relationships was present throughout all the interviews. The need for specialist training to support children of people in prison was mentioned by the participants. All participants felt that schools could improve provision for these children if they looked at opportunities for more specialised training. Therefore, it can be argued that local authorities and school improvement leads have a responsibility to respond to this unmet need as not doing so will potentially have a profound effect on a large number of pupils. Whilst it is always necessary to bear in mind that children will be affected differently by parental imprisonment, the anecdotes shared as part of this research show that the impact of parental imprisonment is often far reaching. It certainly can and does affect children’s educational experiences and impacts on their academic, emotional, social and personal progress. Therefore, it is important that sensitive, appropriate support is made available to those families and children who will/do require support and schools arguably have an important role to play in what that support could/should look like.

**Recommendations and reflections:**

Recommendation: Information about children of people in prison should be shared across agencies and with schools.

Reflection: What might be the negative implications associated with this and how this might be addressed?

Recommendation: Schools should prioritise developing positive empathic relationships with all pupils and their families. They should be willing to try to understand the reasons for pupils’ challenging behaviour and look to attachment aware, and trauma informed models to support them in their response.

Reflection: What are some of the wider societal barriers to tackling negative behaviour in schools and reducing exclusions and how might these be addressed?

Recommendation: Responsibility for developing specialist training and improving resources for schools to support children of people in prison should lie with national agencies and local authorities.

Reflection: What recommendations would you make to develop policy both nationally and locally to support children of people in prison at school?

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1. A child in need is defined under the Children Act 1989 as a child who is unlikely to reach or maintain a satisfactory level of health or development, or their health or development will be significantly impaired without the provision of services, or the child is disabled (Department for Education,2019).  [↑](#footnote-ref-1)