# **Inclusive Adult Educational Opportunities within the Criminal Justice System: Reflecting on the work of the charity Theatre in Prison and Probation (TiPP).**

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**Abstract**

High levels of disadvantage, disability, mental health distress, neurodiversity and acquired impairments associated with getting older are well documented amongst the prison population. An aspect of lifelong learning which happens beyond college and university campuses and does not necessarily lead to accreditation is the focus here. This paper shines a light on prison based broadly educational programmes involving self-expression through widely defined notions of drama. Pertinent literature underpins discussion of an independent evaluation of activities of the UK charity ‘Theatre in Prison and Probation’ (TiPP) which delivers research informed artistic projects within and beyond the criminal justice system (CJS), emphasising personal development over performance or accredited learning. Constraints and rewards of working in this field and the myriad benefits for participants are considered with reference to the TiPP review and wider research. These found that wellbeing, confidence, self-efficacy, employability, future orientation, agency, and reduction in frustration and ‘behaviour which challenges the system’ were frequently identified as benefits of participation. Appropriate support for those aspiring to college or university post release is another issue for inclusive educators which is considered. While ‘nothing about us without us’ is an accepted research principle within critical disability studies, researchers in prison identified extensive constraints around accessing prisoner voice which are discussed here.

The TiPP evaluation involved thematic analysis of practitioner views and a review of the website. Concerns (common to much of the charity sector) were raised about sustainable funding and the pros and cons of diversification into more community-based practice were considered. Consensus about the value of collaborating with universities, research informed practice and positive, creative approaches was apparent, but TiPP’s website revealed elements of ethos and activity not readily expressed to the wider world and the review recommended honing the message for potential stakeholders.

The original study was undertaken pre pandemic and Covid has shattered every aspect of prison-based education. Inclusive practitioners committed to social justice have expertise to contribute to the endeavour of rebuilding lifelong learning inside prison and supporting progression to further and higher education post release.

The positionality of the authors is exemplified by the following quotations.

Prisoners are characterised by Clements (2004 p169) as ‘one of the most excluded (groups) in society’.

“All prisoners should have the right to take part in cultural activities and education aimed at the full development of the human personality” (United Nations [UN], 2009, p. 9’’ quoted by O’Brien et al (2021) p3.

*Background information from the TiPP website is included in italics throughout this paper.* <https://www.tipp.org.uk> accessed 19-09-21.

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**Unfamiliar Terminology**

The following quotations from TiPP’s website, illustrates a degree of commonality of purpose with other inclusive learning practitioners who are usually working in less constraining circumstances.

*‘Our work is concerned with personal and social change in pursuit of a more just and equitable society.’*

*‘Participatory arts have the power to transform people's lives for the better.’*

TiPP’s website includes possibly unfamiliar terminology which merits explanation, for example. ‘*The model draws upon a range of sources including desistance literature and self-determination theory.’*

Rex (1999) defines desistance simply as ‘reduction in reoffending’ (p366). Collins (2019), Deci and Ryan (2008), Johnson (2008), TiPP and others, emphasise the transformational potential of the arts, including self-efficacy, self-worth, educational and societal benefits, alongside desistance, which is tangibly measurable and therefore attractive to funders. TiPP evidence positive behavioural change and increased confidence in participants but does not make bold, direct cause and effect claims around desistance.

Self-determination theory is explained by Deci and Ryan (2008) p182 as ‘an empirically based theory of human motivation, development, and wellnesses. They concur with Henley et al (2013) that a sense of agency is crucial to self-determination and impacted by social conditions.

**Systematic Literature Review: Introduction**

The systematic literature review underpins Dr Dolan-Martin’s commissioned evaluation of TiPP by shining a light on other (mainly) arts-based educational initiatives in prison. While aspects of TiPP are unique, common challenges and constraints are revealed around context and sustainable funding. The review extends beyond the UK as similar themes emerged from elsewhere, particularly the USA. Benefits of participation include strengthening family bonds and self-expression and learning to make positive choices including around skills development and employability post release. In 2022 the literature review was revisited with the pandemic in mind and the search revealed catastrophic reductions in access to all aspects of prison education.

**Process**

Academic databases and internet searches of post millennium studies via Google Scholar were utilised, using terms like ‘inclusive arts and theatre-based education in prison and probation’ and ‘prison education and social justice’. ‘Arts’ produced papers on visual and performance mediums. Twenty-five potentially relevant articles were screened by title and abstract by both authors. The 2022 review included the addition terms ‘Covid’ and ‘pandemic’ and yielded slim but pertinent pickings. Both searches are amalgamated below under thematic subheadings.

Constraints around online learning

Severe restrictions around internet access in prison, largely because of security concerns, make planning online and hybrid learning extremely complex. (Harmes et al 2019, Hesselink 2018) The following quote from Chesnut and Wachendorfer’s 2021 (p1) USA based study is typical and echoed for example by Montenegro (2021) in America and Bradley and Davies, (2021) in the UK. These reference prison education in general and comment on the necessity to increase opportunities for online learning (which may not be ideal for arts-based initiatives).

‘In 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic had a significant impact on  
postsecondary education overall… including …in prison. Throughout 2020, unique constraints within prisons, such as movement restrictions and safety  
concerns, caused major disruptions in education delivery. Additionally, technology limitations… prevented programs from quickly shifting to distance learning and hybrid modalities’.

An oppressive environment

Schliehe’s (2016) study considering emotional, symbolic, embodied ways of coping in prison was informed by Goffman’s (1961) contention that opportunities to develop agency are severely curtailed in environments where choice making is severely restricted. Detrimental social control, involving regulation of time and space by strict boundaries, rules and disciplinary practice and constant surveillance, are similarly discussed in Foucault’s (1975) seminal work *Discipline and Punish*. Foucault reflects on the panopticon (a concept familiar in critical disability studies), as a form of prison surveillance first conceived by Bentham in 1813.

While some studies theorise social oppression with references to scholars like Foucault and Goffman, others, still mindful of oppressive environmental constraints, focus more practically on immediate and potential future benefit of a given project (for example, Anderson 2015, Giles et al 2016). Pandemic informed research emphasises further curtailment of liberty with the cessation of, amongst other things, prison educational opportunities and family visits. (Chesnut and Wachendorfer 2021, Montenegro 2021, O’Brien et al 2021, Suhomlinova et al 2021). The quote which follows shines a bright light on lived reality.

‘When people say that lockdown must be like being in prison and how it’s affected their life and mental health, I think about what it was like for me locked in for 19 hours a day when there were staff shortages. No phones, no Netflix, a few channels on a small TV in your room that shows you a glimpse of the life you once lived. Officers are staring at you through slits in your door. You see an eye, a nose, a flash of light. You don’t have social media connecting you to each other, bringing you humanity in funny videos or updating statuses to say, “I am here’’ quote O’Brien et al ‘s (2021 p3)

Suhomlinova et al (2021) analysed participants letters and poetry which offer sobering insights into worsening conditions. This example is typical ‘my wing, my wing’s yard and the short distance to my work classroom was everything. Now it’s just my cell & the corridor outside my cell… Prison is small & confined anyway, now its minute (Hotaru, C3/August 2020)’

Benefits

Increased compliance and reduced recidivism are usually emphasised by prison staff, while prisoners tend to focus on opportunities for learning and personal development (Brewster, 2014; Cheliotis and Jordanoska, 2016, Devaliant et al, 2018, Henley et al, 2013).Staff and prisoners contributed to Brewster’s (2014) study of three American prisons delivering twelve-week arts programmes through ‘The Actors' Gang’’ project, funded by Arts-in-Corrections (AIC) . Prisoners completed pre and post intervention surveys covering time management, social competence, achievement motivation, intellectual flexibility, emotional control, active initiative, and self-confidence. Benefits identified included enhanced confidence and ability to respond positively to difficult situations. Staff observed fewer disciplinary incidents and greater engagement in academic and vocational education. Brewster’s (2014) findings are not unique and, in keeping with other studies, funding became a thorny issue. AIC folded in 2010, after thirty years, because of a state budget crisis.

Evidence based arguments about the deeper value of creative arts as a conduit to emancipation, empowerment, and personal transformation, are central to the work of Clements (2004), Prendergast (2013), Wilkinson and Cauldfield (2017) and others. Clements (2004, p169) asserts that ‘arts are one of the agents that can naturally encourage spontaneous and participatory learning, enabling a more liberating and self-directed rehabilitative process’.

In a rare ethnographic study by a former prisoner, written years after release, Garcia (2019 p3) reflects on personal long-term benefits from participating in a prison arts-based education ‘It encourages them to take the role of using their personal creative expression to reimagine themselves and their positions in society’. (Using ‘them’ rather than ‘I’ perhaps reflects a sense of distancing from a former life).

Devaliant et al (2018, p4) reflect on the risk of emotional expression in prison. Educators need to understand such complexities in order to work empathically with people in such extreme circumstances.

…prison is a complex environment, which both prompts existential reflection, and prevents the expression of emotional experiences. Within the mistrustful and power-infused relationships which dominate in prison, expression of emotional experiences which disrupt a hyper masculine ‘masked’ subjectivity can be seen as a potentially risky activity for inmates. At the same time, however, central to both good mental health, and the possibility of future desistance, can be seen to be an engagement with just the forms of self-reflection that are being prevented by the practices of many prison environments.

A common conceit amongst various studies is that developing emotional resources to cope and begin to project forward will impact positively during and after prison. Assessing observable behaviour is easier than ascertaining whether someone feels calmer or better placed to make constructive choices and funders tend to favour ‘hard evidence’ over the potentially unreliable prisoner self-reporting about mood and affect. Longitudinal investigations of recidivism and more subtle measures such as ongoing good mental health are few and far between. TiPP’s ‘Changing Stories’ initiative is ‘*designed to equip participants with the language of the creative arts so that they can legitimately speak about the life experiences that define who they are.’* This makes manifest the idea of helping prisoners to equip themselves with tools of self-expression. Poor levels of education prior to incarceration, difficulties with literacy as well as numeracy and evidence of neurodiversity are well documented and the potential impact on self-expression is obvious. (Jones and Manger 2019, Livingston et al 2018, Morken et al 2021).

In 2004 Gussak and Ploumis-Devick framed their discussion about benefits of arts-based education in Florida’s prisons around wellness, developing self-confidence, self-determination, engagement, and agency. Mental health and wellbeing benefits are discussed by Nugent and Loucks (2011) who found that arts-based projects helped with mental health, particularly in developing empowerment and conﬁdence. Maxwell (2017) produced an art exhibition with prisoners with a view to addressing stigma and raising self-esteem by developing an identity other than ‘prisoner’. External validation from family and friends was central and similarly viewed as beneficial by Tett et al (2016) who concluded that

‘Their public successes in performances before audiences of significant others opened up new personal and social identities (as artists or performers) that helped them to begin to envision an alternative self that in turn motivated them towards future desistance from crime’ (p171).

A House of Lords library briefing (Blakey 2017 p14) acknowledged ‘art therapy’ (conceptualised rather broadly) provided opportunities to ‘learn new and different ways to use the mostly nonverbal language of creativity to communicate inner feelings that were not previously available to them by simply thinking or talking about them’. The briefing emphasised addressing numeracy and literacy concerns but also acknowledged the importance of building family relationships and employment prospects post release.

At the time of writing TiPP was engaged in a project entitled ‘Taking Time’ in which participants created visual or performance-based backdrops for various family focussed prison activities. Initial evaluations were highly positive. Continuing bonds beyond the prison gates is a central idea in De Claire and Dixon’s (2017) study emphasising the importance of family visits, which have, of course been curtailed due to Covid (Hewson et al 2020).

Educators based in colleges, universities and community could usefully collaborate with prison-based projects to promote access and inclusion during incarceration and post release. Considerations include whether there are potentially discriminatory practices around admissions (Custer 2018) and what sort of support an individual may require. The following extract from a briefing aimed at the university sector is pertinent.

‘’Applicants with serious criminal convictions who are applying to university will have had to turn their lives around significantly to be at the stage where higher education is a credible next step. Like all applicants, they  
will have worked hard to gain the relevant qualifications and qualities needed to make a successful application. People who have served a prison sentence may have also faced multiple and severe disadvantage – 24% of  
prisoners were taken into care as a child, 41% witnessed violence in their childhood home, 42% were permanently excluded from school and 47% had no qualifications on entry to prison.13 When looking at people  
with more serious offences, broadly it will be the case that the more serious the offence, the longer ago it was committed, and ultimately it is very difficult to achieve release from an indeterminate sentence. For these  
applicants in particular, being in a position to make an application at all is a significant achievement and indicative of a commitment to changing their life for the better. Universities should therefore consider how they  
can best support them to succeed’’. Stacey 2018. <https://unlock.org.uk/accessed> 24-01-22

Research informed practice

Despite the high numbers of prisoners with impairments, mental health concerns, literacy, and numeracy challenges ((Jones and Manger 2019, Livingston et al 2018, Morken et al 2021) and conditions associated with older age (Brooke et al 2020, Turner et al 2018), research considering their inclusion in prison education is extremely sparse.

Miles and Clarke (2006) reviewed research underpinning arts based educational initiatives in the CJS, finding limited funding, a thin evidence base for their efficacy, difficulty with comparison, and imprecisely explained approaches. The funding situation has not improved in the intervening years and the pandemic has made matters worse. TiPP’s approach to research informed practice was unusual in 2006 and remains so now.

Farrell et al (2021) emphasise the importance of seeking broad stakeholder views about the efficacy of prison-based learning. These could include prisoners, staff, families and educators and practitioners from outside. Although evident within TiPPs practice, ‘Nothing about us without us’ (Charlton 2000) is difficult to achieve in prison-based research. Unusually, multiple perspectives, including voices of participating prisoners are presented in Collins’ (2019) writing about the work of the Playing for Time Theatre Company (discussed earlier).

Prendergast (2013) highlights her emotional challenges as an arts educator, working within extensive prison regulations and her empathy for the daily lived experience of prisoners which resonates with Goffman’s ‘total institution’ (1961p1). Session review forms completed by the practitioners were used in Anderson’s (2015) investigation of approaches to leading workshops in five Scottish prisons. They advocated for carefully planned educational initiatives designed with specific objectives around personal development, made the link between arts education practice and desistance, and emphasised the need to work flexibly within the inflexibility of the prison regime.

In 2016 Cheliotis, and Jordanoska’s wide ranging review focussing mainly on recidivism, expressed disquiet about the relationship of research to practice, despite government rhetoric about the importance of evidence-based initiatives.:

The growth in evaluation research has largely followed, rather than predated, the expansion of programming as such. It appears, therefore, that neither the scale nor the precise scope and mechanics of arts-based initiatives to facilitate desistance from crime have been determined by findings from evaluation research, despite political and criminal justice authorities’ proclaimed allegiance to evidence-based policymaking and practice (p25).

The (American) Prison Arts Resource Project (PARP) produced an annotated open access bibliography, aimed at researchers and policy makers, of evidence-based evaluations of impact of 59​ programmes, summarising research goals, methodology and findings. (Gardner et al, 2014). Nothing comparable exists in the UK. Uniformity of presentation between studies makes Gardner et al’s work useful to enable comparison between programmes.

Funding

Sustainable funding for research and practice is a common concern in the UK and beyond (Brewster 2014, Giles et al 2016, Nugent and Loucks’ 2011) which Covid has exacerbated (O’Brien et al 2021). This problem is not new. Clements (2004) commented on New Labour’s reduction in funding for UK arts participation in prison, in favour of ‘an instrumental agenda concerning basic, key, and cognitive skills’ (p169).

Research exploring long term costs of chronic mental health distress, estrangement from family and post release unemployment, versus wellness, enduring family ties and gainful employment, may impress upon economists and policy makers the logic of investing in rehabilitative activity focussed on developing agency and the ability to make positive sustainable choices. Complexities around methodology and the politics of funding research which spans different administrative terms may form part of the story around underinvestment in longitudinal work. Accessing funding for an evaluation of psychological benefits of participation is unusual as outcomes are difficult to measure.

Giles et al (2016) suggest that qualitative and humanitarian impacts of arts-based initiatives within the CJS receive limited evaluative attention. Those with expertise in participatory and emancipatory research could well provide useful insights, particularly if working collaboratively with researchers who understand the constraints of the context. Universities may have a vital role to play in developing research partnerships with organisations such as TiPP in order to progress the research informed practice agenda by sharing expertise and research funding.

Summary

The selected papers coalesce around a shared understanding that people in prison are highly marginalised disadvantaged learners and arts-based initiatives are valuable, in themselves and as part of broadly conceptualised CJS based education. Evaluation of benefits is complex, involving competing agendas around reduced recidivism, and compliance versus personal development, self-expression, and increased confidence. Recording whether a participant ended up back in prison is easy. It is more difficult to assess subtle changes in wellbeing and self-efficacy. Although politicians make the right noises, funding for activity and evaluation is tight and covid has made this worse.

Authentic voices of prisoners as research participants are hard to reach and researchers with expertise in emancipatory and participatory approaches could support this agenda provided, they understood the contextual constraints. Disability and neurodiversity professionals have a great deal of understanding of inclusive practice and much to learn about the constraints of prison education. Collaborative work could enhance practice but, as always, funding is an issue.

The TiPP evaluation which follow provides further insights into practice and useful information about an approach which could be replicated in other contexts in which reflexive practitioners interrogate their own practice with a view to enacting positive change. Findings provide a deeper understanding of working as an arts educator within the CJS and as part of the charities sector.

# Primary Research

# Methodology

Participatory and emancipatory research (Danieli and Woodhams, 2005, French and Swain 1997), would involve direct engagement with prisoners as research participants as well as the delivery of outcomes of practical use to stakeholders. Although much of TiPPs research elicits the views of prisoners, this review does not. Potentially however it lays some useful foundations upon which to develop research informed practice. As well as scrutinising the website and conducting a group creative activity, Dolan-Martin recorded interviews with TiPP’s Chair of Trustees, Board Member, Director, Administrator, two Project Directors, two Freelance Artists, and two students on placement. Thematic Analysis (TA) informed recommendations about the future direction of TiPP’s work and possible changes to the website. According to Clarke and Braun (2014 p297), TA ‘provides accessible and systematic procedures for generating codes and themes from qualitative data’. Codes form foundations for themes, which can organise and communicate patterns of meaning, identifying differences as well as commonalities. TA is not without its critics (for example, Kiger and Varpio (2020) and Nowel et al 2017). Roberts et al 2019 argue TA based research seldom explain process adequately. This study aims to provide sufficient detail, including methodological references. Johnson (2020) p138 asserts that ‘Qualitative data collection and analyses are often modified through an iterative approach’. Researcher reflexivity, essentially a researcher’s insight into their own biases and rationale for decision-making … is critical to rigor’. The authors of this study are reflexively aware that they shared the ontological perspective of the respondents, around prison arts education being a good thing.

**Research Questions covered the following points:**

* Key messages from TiPP?
* What we (TiPP) say about ourselves and tell other people?
* Interviewee’s role, what brought you to TiPP?
* Reflection on something at TiPP you were proud of, glad to have been associated with, and/or left a lasting impression
* Understandings of TiPP’s role and vision
* Ideas about future development including anything TiPP should stop doing
* Thoughts about interrelatedness of the main strands of TiPPs work (participatory practice, teaching and training, and academic research)
* TiPP’s effectiveness
* Message TiPP should emphasise in advocating for the work
* Additional comments.

Principal themes emerging from transcript analysis were identified under the following categories:

* Individual motivations for joining/working with TiPP
* Organisational culture
* TiPP’s professional practice in participatory engagement, training and developing artists and students, and the relationship between these activities and academic work
* Opportunities for strategic development and future projects.
* Perceptions of constraints
* Whether the diversity of the work diluted the focus
* Perceptions on ‘brand’ from within and beyond TiPP
* Messages to communicate to the outside world.

A facilitated group creative exercise and discussion enabled core team members to reflect on the artistic programme. Contributors noted salient points on post-it notes which they subsequently categorised under the following headings:

* TiPP’s artistic work
* How work is made
* Information dissemination
* What makes the work high quality?

Dolan-Martin scrutinised web content and asked interviewees about what might be missing. The analysis covered:

* Public expression of TiPP’s vision
* Principal messages about:
* Participatory arts practice and training
* Involvement in research
* Target groups

# Findings

TiPP’s website describes bespoke projects, negotiated, and delivered by practising artists, emphasising fun, play and laughter. Research contributors were in agreement around buy-in to TiPP’s vision, culture, and practice. Motivation to engage in arts education within the CJS was described in terms of the potentially life changing benefits of offering participants greater control through small reasonable goals, practical and social skills development, heightened self-efficacy, self-agency, and social and cultural capacity.

## TiPP’s practice

TiPP’s website reflects the range of activities. Contributors concur with descriptors of TiPP’s practice expressed in term of ‘stirring things up,’ ‘preventing stagnation within the industry,’ and working within ‘an otherwise sterile and inflexible regime.’ Company culture was characterised as open, positive, and creative. Typically, interviewees described colleagues as ‘committed, mutually supportive and highly skilled.’ TiPP’s longevity, retention, nurture, and development of staff were identified as strengths. Comments included ‘we only work with the best artists. Collaborating artists are named on the website but with little exposition of who these people are and their status within the artistic community.

Pride in working with established and early career practising artists in supportive and nurturing ways was a recurring theme. ‘We offer practitioners support and opportunities through in situ training; we guide.’ Artists felt enabled to reflect on their wider practice and challenge their pre-conceptions. Respondents characterised as high quality TiPP’s delivery and processes around recruitment, induction, support, and development of accomplished artists with a passion for social change. Openness, creativity and the core team’s expertise and experience were identified as key to nurturing and enhancing specialised and responsive artistic engagement. One interviewee said, ‘It’s the kind of company who really support you – loyalty is exceptional and that makes them really good to work with.’

Respondents described sensitive and knowledgeable engagement from highly skilled committed artists as a vital ingredient in the alchemy that led to transformational interactions. Many cited as a quality indicator the fact that participants elected to take part in their own free time. The importance of quality is reflected on the website.

*‘Involvement in well-designed participatory arts projects improve self-efficacy, impact positively on levels of self-agency and improve social and cultural capital.’*

*‘TiPP seeks to achieve these changes by providing people with a means to gain more control over their lives through participation in high quality, participatory arts programmes.’*

Social benefits were emphasised *alongside d*eveloping practical competences, personal confidence, agency, and efficacy, leading to heightened social and cultural capital. *‘…positive impact on family and social relationships, self-identity, literacy and oracy levels, and employment prospects,’* Projects set out t*o ‘develop practical and social skills and provide participants with a challenge, offering people new perspectives and a changed focus.’*

Most contributors strongly believed in the potential of TiPP to achieve lasting effects which could ripple through communities, for example via *‘Youth focussed projects emphasising ‘successfully re-entry to mainstream education or training.’* Potentially life changing social outcomes were universally prioritised above the aesthetic of the art produced.

Research Informed Practice

Despite The ‘nothing about us without us ‘conundrum in prison, peer reviewed academic research into practice, especially involving authentic voices of recipients, was perceived as important and particular to TiPP. Examples from the website of research illustrating positive effects and creative approaches, include expressing outcomes as poetry, visual art, music and film ([Project Gallery 1](https://www.tipp.org.uk/gallery-01)).

Web content emphasised authentic voice and respect within the research process:

*‘The principle that knowledge is co-created through the creative arts process, an approach which minimises the risks of othering our research partners, exploiting them or leaving them voiceless in the telling of their own stories.’*

Contributors felt that a ‘one size fits all’ approach to research would be inappropriate. ‘Our research takes different forms depending on who we are working with and what questions we want to answer.’

Productive association between TiPP and the University of Manchester’s Centre for Applied Theatre, and Criminology and Sociology disciplines included valued opportunities for postgraduate study and placements for final-year undergraduates. One interviewee described this collaboration and the link between practice and academic research as ‘a jewel in TiPP’s crown.’ Others explained: ‘We apply an academic skill set to our practice. This makes us unique.’ and ‘Independent academic assessment helps us to advocate and gives us authority.’ TiPP’s Company Director illustrates robust efforts to ensure that practice is evidence based and avoids making grand claims which cannot be substantiated. ‘I cannot tell you whether we are reducing reoffending – I don’t know, and I won’t say it because I can’t prove it. I will only argue for what I can prove.’

## Opportunities and constraints

TiPP presents as fleet of foot, adaptable, entrepreneurial, and able to react to opportunities as they arise. The website emphasises TiPP’s mission and vision. ‘Conscious of the magnitude of this mission and the challenges that exist in evidencing it we seek to achieve smaller, more realisable goals that we can measure and observe in our day-to-day work.’

While the strategy was perceived to be manifest in ‘artistically led projects and willingness to constantly seek new partners to facilitate their delivery’ the small size of the core team and their hands-on involvement in delivery was felt to limit time available for serious strategic planning. ‘Many projects being on the back burner’ and ‘difficulty separating strategic development from artistic ambition and creative goals’ was troubling to some but there was general agreement about the importance of being ‘artistically alive’ in order to survive, thrive and respond to opportunities.

TiPP experienced the removal of National Portfolio Organisation (NPO) status with Arts Council England (ACE) which one interviewee partly attributed to not being particularly good at self-promotion. Contributors described a resulting ‘siege mentality’ and ‘being in ‘survival mode.’ Despite resulting financial constraints, the potential for greater flexibility was also recognised. Suggestions for potential growth revealed some disagreement about embracing additional projects beyond prison and probation versus consolidation within the core CJS focus. Prison and probation services were described as ‘starved of resources’ and therefore unable to prioritise arts-based educational initiatives, making diversification a necessary but risky consideration. Consensus was clear around potentially deepening TiPP’s collaborations with higher education, partly to access university sector research funding.

The following comment, likely to resonate with Widening Participation (WP) practitioners in the university sector, illustrates TiPP’s working practice within and beyond the CJS:

‘We give access… to really high-quality arts participation arts experiences to people who have probably never ever done anything like this before. We must find ways of working with people who don’t engage… we have strategies around entry routes… You have to start from where people are at, finding good spaces and where people want to go.’

## 

## The message

The website describes TiPP’s range, including work with groups beyond the CJS such as people at risk of offending, refugees, asylum-seekers, and students. While demonstrating adaptability, concerned were expressed about the website not communicating a clear vision around a strategically driven single body of work, i.e., making TiPP look like ‘a Jack of all Trades’. Interviewees reflected that the name worked as a brand which carried a solid history but expressed concern that TiPP’s specific association with ‘theatre,’ ‘prisons and ‘probation’ was possibly outmoded, certainly confusing and no longer reflective of the scope and scale of the work. The following descriptors of this range are indicative:

‘We enable and facilitate access to and experience of the arts to people who have contact with CJS or have the potential to do so – as many people do, for example drug and alcohol users or sex workers, or people who were looked after children.’

‘TiPP do work in the CJS, either directly with prisoners to support and develop them, or with people working within the CJS to inform their work or change their practice or change their attitudes.’

‘We use our professional skills in supporting people from vulnerable backgrounds.’

Despite their own positivity, contributors expressed concern about how the work is perceived externally. Examples of tabloid headlines and everyday encounters with people lacking relevant experience reveal negativity. The following comment, which relates to prison education more generally, was attributed in 2011 in the Daily Mail online to our now Home Secretary

‘Ms Patel said: 'This is yet another example of gold-plated rights for convicted criminals at the expense of their victims and the law-abiding majority.’

The need to ‘shout louder’ and ‘promote TiPP ‘in the right way to the right people’ was powerfully expressed. Selling points, reflected in the following quotations, include longevity, expertise, valuing people, responsiveness, bespoke programmes, and transformational impact Research evidence could be used more effectively to support these arguments.

‘They’re honest, they’re open, they are responsive, the clients are at the heart of everything they do – it’s founded in theory – it’s not just arty farty. There’s no fat on anything’.

‘They’re solid – I love working with them. You’re challenged, but you’re going to be trained too. I don’t feel this passionate about any other company’.

# What’s missing from the Website?

Dolan-Martin made the following observations.

* Exposition of social outcomes is well developed and well documented, but the website consistently underplays the quality, scope, and scale of the art that TiPP makes, despite having a sophisticated and realistic understanding of its artistic quality and practice.
* Constraints on promotion by traditional means, such as peer and press review, necessitate the need to explore other avenues to increase exposure, for example within public settings. TiPP could be more explicit about methods of engagement, the highly sophisticated and seated knowledge within its pool of practitioners, and the diversity of practice across many art forms.
* Interviewees enthused about opportunities for artists and students to develop their understanding of the CJS and consequently re-evaluate their own preconceptions and their artistic practice. TiPP is well placed to deliver this, and it could be a selling point.
* Academic collaborations merit a higher profile and add gravitas which is further enhanced when associated with the longevity of the organisation.
* The valuable ***bespoke*** nature of TiPP’s projects could be more prominent on the website.
* The diversity of TiPP’s client base as well as its artist pool (e.g., including people at risk of offending, or socially and/or economically disadvantaged) could be more visible. Framing the narrative around protected characteristics identified in the 2010 Equality Act might be helpful.
* Interrelatedness of various strands of work, the ***why*** underpinning choice of projects, and the relationship of practice and vision could be expressed more coherently.

**Conclusions**

TiPP could reflect its work more effectively through its website and any rebranding must promote a coherent vision. Moving beyond the original CJS focus into a wider range of high-quality research informed arts practice with vulnerable groups is a possibility. Incorporating views of people on the receiving end of TiPP’s practice would inevitably have created a more rounded review. As contributors were self-selecting the extent to which their comments are representative is unknown. Deepening engagement with research that encompasses authentic voices of participants is a priority, albeit difficult in prison. Focussing on reducing recidivism and value for money is generally more appealing to funders than explorations into whether arts-based education makes prisoners feel better. Articulating a straightforward cause and effect relationship between participation and recidivism is simplistic. People have complex lives and multiple identities, and researchers need to be mindful of considering people in prison to be a homogeneous group. Covid has had a profound impact on organisations such as TiPP and prison education generally. Benefits of such work are myriad and the consequences of its cessation deeply worrying. It is necessary, in the first instance, to think about what can be salvaged and how quickly.

Inclusive education practitioners could add value by collaborating with organisations such as TiPP around research and developing further opportunities for the most disadvantaged of adult learners. Collaboration could open up opportunities and develop mutual understanding of each other’s contexts. University and college staff need to know, for example, about internet restrictions in prison and that a criminal record may be a barrier to admission to further of higher education post release.

**Collaborative Research**

Researchers working in higher education are pushing at an open door with TiPP which already has a working relationship with Manchester University. This may well be the case with similar organisations and a mapping exercise would be useful. Education within the CJS more broadly needs to be rebuilt and inter disciplinary conversations are an essential starting point for building mutual contextual understanding of conundrums such as how to enact the principle of ‘nothing about us without us’ and how to overcome barriers such as restricted internet access and discriminatory university admissions processes.

**Contact Details for TiPP**

https://www.tipp.org.uk/signup

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