

RoadRunners: An Exploratory Study of an Activity Programme for Young Offenders in North Dublin

by
Nicole Byrne

Abstract

Purpose

The Children Act 2001, in a significant departure from earlier Irish juvenile justice legislation, introduces a range of community based sanctions for young offenders including a Probation (training and activity programme) Order. This study, in the context of these new developments, was concerned with a particular type of intervention for young offenders: an activity programme.

Methods

This small scale qualitative study explored a specific programme, the RoadRunners, from the perspective of eight male participants through the use of semi-structured interviews.

Results

It was found that prior to participation on the RoadRunners, the participants were disengaged from the education system and their time was characterised by boredom and offending. Participation provided the young men with the opportunity to have new experiences and learn new skills, such as teamwork. Following completion of the RoadRunners, six of the eight participants had re-engaged in education. Four had self-reported changes in their offending behavior and all reported changes in how they spent their leisure time.

Conclusions

In line with the limited literature on this topic, this research found that activities provided a medium for personal and social development. They

also provided the young people with a constructive way to spend their time; providing a diversion from offending. This simple notion of the diversion mechanism has been largely ignored in the literature to date. This research also draws attention to the need for future research into the crucial role of staff as mentors in programmes of this nature

Keywords

Children Act 2001, young offenders, physical activity.

Introduction

For almost a century in Ireland our juvenile justice system was governed by the same legislation: The Children Act 1908.¹ On the 8th of July 2001, a new Children Act was introduced which dramatically changed how young offenders are responded to in this country. Detention is now viewed as a measure of last resort and in a significant departure from earlier legislation, the Act makes provision for ten community based sanctions.² Included in this menu of sanctions is a Probation (training and activities programme) Order. Under part 9, section 124 (1) of the Act “a court may order that a child shall undertake and complete a programme of training or specified activities in accordance with the provisions of this section”.³ The aim of the Order is to help the young person sanctioned to learn positive social values.⁴ Although this Order was introduced over ten years ago, there is no research on this type of intervention to date in Ireland. Indeed, the topic of juvenile justice is broadly under researched in Ireland.⁵ According to O’Sullivan, there has been a “virtual neglect” of the topic of juvenile justice since the foundation of the Irish State.⁶ More specifically, interventions and policy have been, and continue to be, introduced without a research base. It is of great concern that

1 Ursula Kilkelly, *Youth Justice in Ireland: Tough Lives, Rough Justice* (Dublin: Department of Justice and Law Reform, 2011) [hereafter Kilkelly, *Youth Justice*].

2 Mairead Seymour, *Juvenile Justice in the Republic of Ireland* (European Society of Criminology, 2005) [hereafter Seymour, *Juvenile Justice*].

3 Government of Ireland, *Children Act 2001* (Dublin: Stationary Office, 2001).

4 Irish Youth Justice Service, *Irish Youth Justice Service Annual Plan 2010* (Dublin: Department of Justice and Law Reform, 2011).

5 Paul O’Mahony, “A Brief Overview of Juvenile Justice in Ireland” In *Children, Young People and Crime in Britain and Ireland: From Exclusion to Inclusion*, ed M. Barry et al. (Edinburgh: Scottish Executive Research Unit, 2000).

6 Eoin O’Sullivan, “Ireland” in *Confronting Youth in Europe-Juvenile Crime and Juvenile Justice*, ed. J. Mehlbye et al. (Copenhagen: AKF Forlaget, 1998), 341.

various approaches to dealing with young offenders are being introduced in the context of a dearth of research on juvenile justice in this country.⁷

This qualitative study was interested in exploring and describing a specific intervention for young offenders: a physical activity programme. It aimed to do this from the perspective of programme participants. For the purpose of this research, following Taylor, Crow, Irvine and Nichols, physical activity programme refers to planned and regular opportunities for participation in activities including 'sport' (both indoor and outdoor), and 'physical recreation' (eg. walking, expeditions).⁸ The research aimed to explore a particular physical activity programme: the RoadRunners. This programme caters for young people ranging in age from sixteen to twenty four, from a specific area of North Dublin. This area of Dublin is characterised by high unemployment rates, high crime rates and low educational attainment. The RoadRunners is twenty six weeks in duration and consists of a programme of activities including running, gardening, dance and expeditions, whereby on completion participants are awarded with the Bronze Gaisce Award.⁹ The majority of participants who take part in the programme are under the supervision of the Probation Service.

This research aimed to explore what participation in this programme involves from the perspective of young people who have taken part in the RoadRunners. The research was not an evaluation of a programme nor did it aim to find out if the RoadRunners reduces recidivism, rather it is was an exploratory study of an intervention involving activities for young offenders.

Methods

Research Design

This qualitative research study adopted the perspective of interpretivism. According to Rossman and Rallis "interpretative research typically tries to

⁷ Seymour, *Juvenile Justice*, 20.

⁸ Peter Taylor, Iain Crow, Dominic Irvine and Geoff Nichols, "Methodological Considerations in Evaluating Physical Activity Programmes for Young Offenders", *World Leisure and Recreation*, 41 (1) (1999), 11.

⁹ Otherwise known as the President's Award, this is Ireland's National challenge Award for young people. The Bronze Award requires the young person to complete thirteen weeks of at least one hour activity a week in the areas of community involvement, personal skills and physical recreation, alongside planning, preparing and undertaking an adventure journey (Gaisce, 2013).

understand the social world as it is (the status quo) from the perspective of individual experience, hence an interest in subjective worldviews".¹⁰ As this research was specifically concerned with the individual experiences of participation on the Roadrunners, this perspective was deemed most suitable.

Sampling

Purposive sampling was used for this research.¹¹ This type of sampling was chosen as it allowed for the specific selection of respondents who had actively participated in the programme and thus were able to share first hand their experiences. As the aim of the study was to explore and describe an intervention from the perspective of programme participants this was deemed the most suitable sampling method. This type of sampling is also well suited to small scale and in depth studies. It is not intended to be statistically representative.

Access

In line with the chosen sampling strategy, there was a strategic request for volunteers. The researcher had an existing relationship with Roadrunners staff due to a placement in the Probation Service, and these staff members were contacted and informed about the aims of the research and the criteria for selecting participants. The staff made a list of Roadrunners participants who met the criteria in order of most recent graduates from the course. They then contacted potential participants for the research. This was deemed most appropriate due to data protection and the staff member's existing relationship with the programme graduates. The first ten participants on the list agreed to take part in the study and they were then provided with more in depth information sheets. Two of the ten did not attend for interview. This included a female who could not come to the interview location due to a threat of violence in the area. She was then unavailable for phone interview. The table below gives more detailed information on the participants in the research.

¹⁰ Gretchen B. Rossman and Sharon F. Rallis, *Learning in the Field: An Introduction to Qualitative Research* (London: SAGE, 2003), 46.

¹¹ Jane Ritchie and Jane Lewis, eds *Qualitative Research: A Guide for Social Science Students and Researchers* (London: SAGE 2000).

Participant Information Table

Name	Gender	Age	Year of Completion
Peter	Male	18	2012
Philip	Male	18	2012
Jake	Male	18	2012
Mark	Male	18	2011
Barry	Male	18	2011
Brian	Male	19	2010
Will	Male	21	2009
Greg	Male	19	2009

Data Collection

The method of data collection used in this research was semi-structured interviews. According to Whittaker “interviews are best used for research that focuses on the knowledge, values, beliefs and attitudes of participants”.¹² This research was interested in the knowledge and also the attitudes of participants, which cannot necessarily be observed and hence interviews were chosen as the most suitable method. Interviews were also chosen above other methods due to a desire to give participants a voice. This was seen as crucial as existing literature has highlighted how the voice of young offenders has been neglected and marginalised in the study of offending and interventions with offenders.¹³ Interviewing participants gave them the opportunity to talk about their experience in their own words. The interviews were both semi-structured and retrospective in nature. In using semi-structured interviews, an interview schedule was developed as recommended by Whittaker.¹⁴ Questions were created with the aim of exploring participant’s experience of the Roadrunners and what the programme involved, their experience of the juvenile justice system, and of education and training. As the interviews were retrospective in nature, participants were able to reflect on their time in the Roadrunners and discuss how they had spent their time since completing the

¹² Andrew Whittaker, *Research Skills for Social Work* (London: SAGE, 2012), 37 [hereafter Whittaker, *Research Skills*].

¹³ Wing Hong Chui, B. Tupman and C. Farlow, “Listening to Young Adult Offenders: Views of the Effect of a Police-Probation Initiative in Reducing Crime”, *The Howard Journal of Criminal Justice*, 42 (3) (2003): 269.

¹⁴ Whittaker, *Research Skills*, 96.

programme. The interviews took place in an interview room in the community job centre. This venue was chosen due to its location and accessibility. Two of the eight interviews were carried out over the phone due to a threat of violence for these participants in an area near the interview location. With the permission of participants, interviews were taped and then transcribed.

Data Analysis

The data was analysed using qualitative thematic analysis. Qualitative thematic analysis is “a method for identifying, analyzing and reporting patterns (themes) within data”.¹⁵ The first three transcripts were reviewed for emerging themes and then coding categories were created. The remaining transcripts were then reviewed according to criteria in the coding categories. This process was done manually, using a colour coding system. The codes were then grouped according to category.

Ethical Considerations

Approval for this research was granted by the Trinity College Research Ethical Approval Committee on the 1st of October 2012. Each participant in the research was provided with, and signed, an information sheet and a consent form. The content of these forms was also explained verbally to participants prior to interview, to cater for low literacy levels. The participants taking part in this research had been involved in illegal activities in the past and may have also been involved in criminal activities at the time of research. The bounds and limits of confidentiality were explained prior to, and throughout the research process. In terms of anonymity, when writing up the research, pseudonyms were used for all participants and the name of the programme was changed.

Limitations

Some limitations of this study should be noted. Firstly, although the majority of RoadRunners programme participants from 2009 to 2012 were male, the programme does cater for young people of either gender. Unfortunately, there were no female participants in this research. Secondly, it is important to note that all participants in this research volunteered to participate in interviews

¹⁵ Ibid.

and also completed the RoadRunners programme. This may have had an impact on the findings. This is a point that has been highlighted by academics writing on this topic.¹⁶

It is also important to note that with retrospective interviewing “memory is fallible”, and the researcher must keep this in mind.”¹⁷

Finally, this research relates to a specific programme or intervention at a particular point in time and hence is not generalisable.

Results

This part of the paper contains an analysis drawing on eight semi-structured interviews with participants on the Roadrunners programme. It is divided into three sections: ‘Paths into the Roadrunners’, ‘Experience of what the Roadrunners Involves’ and ‘Experience Post Roadrunners’. Each section contains a number of themes which are discussed in more detail below.

Paths into the RoadRunners

Three core themes emerged from interviews in relation to these eight young men’s paths into the Roadrunners. The first involves engagement with the juvenile justice system. The second theme involves a lack of engagement with the education system. The third theme ‘doing nothin’ applies to how the young men spent their time prior to participating on the programme.

All eight participants interviewed had contact with An Garda Síochána, Young Person’s Probation (YPP), and the courts or juvenile detention centres prior to their involvement with the RoadRunners. Some, such as Brian, often came to the attention of the Gardaí:

I’d been getting arrested; getting caught with things... prescription pills. (Brian)

Other participants had more extensive involvement with the juvenile justice system:

Well I first got locked up in 2006 when I was fourteen, I got put in custody for two or three weeks, I got out then and about two months later I got two

¹⁶ Andy Smith and Ivan Waddington, “Using Sport in the Community Schemes to Tackle Crime and Drug Use Among Young People: Some Policy Issues and Problems”, *European Physical Education Review* 10 (3) (2004). [hereafter Smith and Waddington, *Sport in the Community*].

¹⁷ Roger Sapsford and Victor Jue, *Data Collection and Analysis* (London: SAGE, 2006).

years when I was fourteen, so I stayed in then 'til I was sixteen in (named detention centre) and then when I was sixteen I went em to (named place of detention.... (Will)

Prior to their involvement with the RoadRunners, seven of the eight participants were not attending either education or training. The educational qualifications of the participants were limited. Half had left school before sitting their Junior Certificate Exam. Of the four who had sat their Junior Certificate, one had done so in a detention centre. The remaining three left school immediately after the exam. Two of the participants had attended another course after leaving school but were then excluded. Mark was the exception; he was attending a FÁS course before the RoadRunners and got leave to attend the programme. This lack of engagement in education or training meant that these young men had a lot of free time.

Before participating in the RoadRunners, all participants reflected on how they spent this free time 'hanging around' (Greg, Pete), 'gambling' (Will) or 'doing nothin'' (Brian, Philip). Barry smoked cannabis in his spare time. A number of the participants also spoke about how they caused trouble or came to the attention of the Gardaí:

...sitting around with the boys on the block just wasting my time doing nothin', getting chased by the gardas or annoying other people or whatever, you know what I mean, nothing good anyway. (Brian)

Hence, engagement with the juvenile justice system, a lack of engagement with education and leisure time characterised by doing nothing was the norm for these eight young men prior to participating in the RoadRunners.

Experience of the RoadRunners

In discussing what the Roadrunners involved, a number of themes emerged. These include new experiences, constructive use of time, teamwork, the role of staff and the difference between attending YPP and the Roadrunners.

A consistent theme that emerged from the interviews was that as part of the programme participants had the opportunity to take part in activities they had never tried before, which often led to the development of new skills;

I think I learnt communicating and me leadership because eh everyone who wasn't working I was getting them working and Mary was even saying I was a big influence on everybody there. (Brian)

Alongside the pleasure of trying new activities, another theme which emerged concerned time and the constructive use of time which the programme enabled. Taking part in the RoadRunners provided these young men with a constructive way to spend their time. This quote from Barry illustrates this point:

You can't roll a joint in front of Mary now can you! (laughs). I'm only messing, but it's just 'cos you're getting out you're doing things you're doing stuff, it's more like you're not sitting around and if you're sitting around you're bored and if you're bored then that's when it happens. (Barry)

Another theme that emerged in relation to what the RoadRunners programme involved was teamwork. Four of the participants mentioned a sense of team or teamwork as an important aspect of the programme:

'Cos everyone works as a team that's like what makes it so good. There's no discriminating or anything. (Mark)

The participants, both as part of a team and individually, received support on the programme and another important theme arising from the interviews was the supportive role played by the staff. All eight participants spoke positively about the RoadRunners staff. According to Barry:

They were sound they were, you could talk to them whenever you wanted to talk to them, you could tell them anything, anything you wanted to tell them and they'd understand. (Barry)

Participants also liked the high expectations the staff had of them and the personal touches the staff used in communicating with them:

You can't get any better than them two, they'll remind you that it's on and all with little smiley faces...if they don't text you they ring you and if you're not in they want an explanation...I liked it (Will)

Indeed, four of the participants when asked what made their experience of the programme so positive stated that it was the staff.

Alongside the participant's discussion of staff, an unexpected theme which emerged from this research was the difference between the RoadRunners programme and Young Person's Probation (YPP). Emerging consistently

from the findings was the notion that there was a difference between attending YPP and attending the RoadRunners. The first difference that was highlighted by participants was that the RoadRunners programme was more intensive and also involved 'getting out and doing things' (Greg). Another difference involved talking with a Probation Officer in a formal setting as opposed to taking part in the programme in a more informal environment. A number of participants expressed a preference for the RoadRunners over more traditional forms of probation. Finally, the fact that the Roadrunners staff were not acting in the role of Probation Officers was important to some of the participants:

I don't see Rachel as a Probation Officer, I see Rachel more like she bleedin' works in the jobs centre, Mary and Rachel, I don't class them as probation (Will).

This section has discussed these eight young men's experience of what the RoadRunners programme involves. The themes which emerged were new experiences, constructive use of time, teamwork, staff, and the differences between YPP and the RoadRunners.

Post-RoadRunners Experiences

Considering the participants experiences after completing the Roadrunners, four themes emerged: a sense of achievement upon completing the course, engagement in training, differences in how leisure time was spent and decreased engagement with the juvenile justice system.

On completing the RoadRunners programme, the participants were awarded certificates of completion, the Bronze Gaisce Award and the Fetac Level Three Award in Health and Fitness. As part of the programme, the participants also took part in a five mile fun run in aid of an Irish homeless charity. Mark was especially proud of his achievement in the run:

We did the marathon thing; I actually came tenth out of about 5,000. Yeah ask Mary, she has the thing out there the award and all, so I kinda represented, I did the best in the jogging, no brag! (Mark)

The above quote illustrates how participation in the RoadRunners enabled these young men to be acknowledged for their achievements.

Following their completion of the RoadRunners, six of the eight participants continued on to further training or education. Greg progressed to a degree

course in outdoor pursuits. Brian pursued a catering course before gaining employment as a chef:

I went to (training centre) and now I'm a chef, I was working in a Mexican restaurant and now I'm working in the (named restaurant) in town, top of the range restaurant. Mary got me into (training centre) when I finished the RoadRunners... (Brian)

Hence, after participating in the programme, most of these young men continued to engage in constructive activities during the week. They also discussed a change in how they spent their leisure time. For two participants this involved caring for others. For example, Philip's uncle is paralysed from the waist down and Philip spends some of his free time caring for him:

My free time now I get me uncle out of bed, I go on the stroll with him like 'cos he can't go anywhere so I get him up and around to my aunties or something with him. (Philip)

As mentioned earlier, a number of the participants spent their time prior to participation in the programme 'up to no good' (Philip) and 'getting chased by the gardas' (Brian). However, it emerged in four of the interviews that there were self-reported changes in attitudes towards offending or indeed offending behaviour following participation in the RoadRunners. Will stated that taking part in the RoadRunners helped him realise that he does not want to be imprisoned again:

It's just made me, I don't want to be locked up, there's no point in me being locked up, I'm just missing out on everything...(Will)

Jake also acknowledged that his attitude towards offending has changed:

Suppose now...back then I would have been getting into trouble...now I'm not know what I mean...There's just no need to be getting into trouble... (Jake)

This final section has illustrated how post-RoadRunners, the participants were proud of their involvement and achievement; six of the eight young men interviewed participated in further training after the programme; there were reported changes in how they spend their leisure time and four participants self-reported changes in their attitudes towards offending.

Discussion

As previously stated, literature in the area of activity programmes and young offenders is limited and there is a lack of consensus among academics and evaluators on activity based programmes. Some academics list perceived benefits of participation including increased fitness, reductions in offending behavior and increased self-confidence,¹⁸ whereas others are more critical of the links between sport or leisure and offending.¹⁹

This section relates the findings of this authors research to some of the key findings of other researchers in the area and to existing evaluations of activity programmes.²⁰ This author's research was not evaluative but rather was interested in what participation in an activity programme involved for eight young people. Hence three elements that were most significant in this research, and that have been discussed to varying degrees in the limited academic literature on this topic, are considered. These are the ideas of activity as a medium for personal and social development; the notion of the diversion mechanism and the role of staff as mentors.

Activity as a Medium for Personal and Social Development

This section focuses on activity as a medium for personal and social development. According to Utting, in his research on sports and constructive leisure activities, it is very difficult to argue that the activities themselves on programmes for young offenders have a generalisable influence on criminality.²¹ According to Utting, simply introducing young people to sport or adventure activities is unlikely to reduce criminality and hence the role of activity is devalued to some extent.²²

Similarly, the Fairbridge programme in the United Kingdom aims to “develop young people’s personal and social skills and build their

18 Relevant literature includes Andrew Miles, *The Academy : A Report on Outcomes for Participants (June 2006-June 2008)* (ESRC Centre for Research on socio-cultural change, University of Manchester 41, 2008) [hereafter Miles, *The Academy*] and Nichols, “Crime and Punishment and Sports Development,” *Leisure Studies* 23 (2) (2004): 178 [hereafter Nichols, *Crime and Punishment*].

19 See Smith and Waddington, *Sports in the Community* and D. Utting, *Reducing Criminality Among Young People: A Sample of Relevant Programmes in the United Kingdom* (Directorate Home Office London, 1996) [hereafter Utting, *Reducing Criminality*].

20 This includes evaluations of the Fairbridge, Summit and Dance United Programmes in the United Kingdom.

21 Utting, *Reducing Criminality*.

22 *Ibid.*, 64.

confidence".²³ In Fairbridge, the activities themselves are used as a medium "to help participants learn about themselves".²⁴ In other words, the outdoor sports activities are used as a means to an end. One of the products of this for participants on Fairbridge is increased self-esteem.

This is also echoed in the findings of the Dance United Evaluation report which found consistent references from participants to the way "completing the programme and managing to cope with the pressure of performance has boosted their confidence".²⁵ However, unlike the Fairbridge study, Miles' research found that the activity itself, dance, and the discipline associated with it was important in achieving this.

Although this author's research did not aim to evaluate the effectiveness of activity in reducing criminality, similar to Utting, it was found that even though the RoadRunners consisted of physical activities, these were not the most significant aspects of the programme. However, this is not to downplay the role of activity. Rather, similar to findings in other literature, this research found that the activities provided a vehicle for other outcomes, in particular personal and social development. An example of this is Brian's reported developments in his communication and leadership skills.

Similar to the Fairbridge study, participants in this author's research reported that participation in the RoadRunners gave them increased self-confidence. What is more, it was often the fact that activities were new and different that was significant for boosting participant's confidence.

To summarise, existing literature in this field often aims to discover if participation in activity and constructive leisure can be linked to decreased criminality.²⁶ However, this research found that what activity actually does is provide a medium for personal and social development. Following Astbury et al., it is argued here that this is very significant as increases in personal and social skills in turn can lead to "long-term behavioural improvements".²⁷

23 Rowan Astbury, Barry Knight and Geoff Nichols, "The Contribution of Sports Related Interventions to the Long-Term Development of Disaffected Youth: An Evaluation of the Fairbridge Programme", *Journal of Park and Recreation Administration*, 23 (3) (2005): 84 [hereafter Astbury et al., *Fairbridge*].

24 Ibid.

25 Miles, *The Academy*.

26 Utting, *Reducing Criminality*.

27 Astbury et al., *Fairbridge*, 82.

The Diversion Mechanism

Considering the topic of activity further, this section focuses on the concept of the diversion mechanism. Nichols, writing on the Summit programme, mentions the idea of diversion and states that “while the participant is doing the programme they cannot at the same time be offending. This can be extended to a diversion from boredom, a regular activity to look forward to, providing a structure to the week or day”.²⁸ In his research, Nichols examined evidence for what he called the “simple diversion mechanism” and found that such evidence was limited due to the short term nature of the programme and the lack of long-term participation in sport.²⁹

This author’s research found that what the activities of running, gardening and dance actually provided, alongside a vehicle for personal and social development, was a constructive way for the young men interviewed to spend their time during the week. Their participation on the programme alleviated boredom. What is more, the results section of this paper has outlined how the young men were engaged in offending behavior and disengaged from the education system prior to their involvement in the RoadRunners. Their free time was characterised by boredom and ‘hanging around’ (Greg, Pete). The RoadRunners provided them with a reason to get out of bed in the morning (Paul). The programme appeared to provide a diversion from boredom, a point which was mentioned either directly or indirectly by all participants. Unlike Summit, the Roadrunners programme was quite long-term in nature at twenty-six weeks duration. Crucially, after completing the Roadrunners, participants self-reported changes they had made to their lifestyles, for example re-engagement in education and decreased involvement in offending behavior.

This notion of the diversion mechanism is very simple, it appears to be at play in the RoadRunners, yet it is something that has not been given enough attention in the literature to date.

Staff as Mentors

This final section of the discussion focuses on the role of staff as mentors

²⁸ Nichols, *Crime and Punishment*.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 179.

in juvenile justice interventions. Research by Nichols³⁰ and Taylor et al.³¹ has stressed the importance of the mentor role of programme staff. Existing literature has also highlighted the most significant characteristics of staff on activity based programmes.

Taylor et al. found that participants in their research stressed the importance of having activity programmes delivered by agencies outside the Probation Service.³² Similarly, on the Summit programme, staff members were sports leaders and participants were referred through the Youth Offending Teams. Both Youth Offending Team staff and sports leaders in this study felt that the Summit staff members were not seen as part of a system, as part of the Youth Offending Team, or as a teacher, and this was a benefit to the programme.³³ However, it was also noted that there were some disadvantages to this as sports leaders were not specially trained to work with young offenders.³⁴

The literature reviewed also stresses the importance of staff going above and beyond the role of facilitators and providing other forms of support, including support after the programme is completed. For example, in the Academy, “for some younger participants, the presence of older female figures to give advice on turbulent social issues beyond the Academy was one of the most striking aspects.”³⁵

Finally, researchers on the Fairbridge programme found that the most important factor in contributing to behavioral change in programme participants was the characteristics of the staff.³⁶ Again, the activities themselves were not the most important aspect but rather provided a catalyst for developing a strong mentor relationship with the staff.³⁷

In this author’s research, staff also appeared to play a crucial mentor role. Indeed, four participants mentioned staff as the most important element of the RoadRunners programme. This research found that staff played a role in ensuring attendance, offering encouragement to participants, and allowing

30 Ibid.

31 Peter Taylor, Iain Crow, Dominic Irvine and Geoff Nichols, *Demanding Physical Activity Programmes for Offenders Under Probation Supervision* (London: Great Britain: Home Office, 1999).

32 Ibid.

33 Nichols, *Crime and Punishment*.

34 Ibid., 190.

35 Miles, *The Academy*, 35.

36 Astbury et al., *Fairbridge*, 97.

37 Ibid., 95.

them to feel listened to.

Participants made it clear that the RoadRunners staff members were regarded as separate from the Probation Service; this is despite the fact that one of the programme organisers was in fact a Probation Officer. Similar to findings by Taylor et al. and Nichols, the notion that the RoadRunners staff were outside the main juvenile justice system appeared to be very important for participants.

Hence, an important aspect of activity programmes appears to be that staff members are viewed by participants as somewhat separate to the more general juvenile justice system. However, simultaneously it is important for staff to have skills and knowledge in relation to offending.

Literature reviewed highlighted the importance of staff going above and beyond the role of facilitator. This author's research also found that a number of the participants continued to link in with Mary from the jobs centre after the Roadrunners programme and continued to receive support.

To summarise, both this research and the existing literature has found that staff play a crucial role in activity programmes for young offenders. They are viewed as mentors and are particularly effective as supportive figures when their role extends beyond the programme. The role of staff, although given some attention in the literature, could be researched more and this research would be particularly relevant to social workers as the main employees working in the Probation Service and other agencies which deliver programmes for young offenders.

This section has discussed three central ideas in relation to activity programmes for young offenders, activity as a medium for personal and social development, the notion of the diversion mechanism and the importance of the mentor role played by programme staff. It is argued here that the simple notion of the diversion mechanism has not been given enough attention in the literature to date. Similarly, according to the participants in this research, the Roadrunners staff play a crucial role on the programme, and more attention needs to be given in the literature to the mentor role of staff on programmes of this nature.

Conclusion

The field of juvenile justice is under-researched in Ireland.³⁸ This research aimed to begin to fill this gap in the literature by focusing on a particular type of community based intervention for young offenders in the context of the Children Act 2001: a programme of physical activities. This is a topic that has been completely ignored in the research in Ireland to date. Existing research from our closest neighbour, the United Kingdom, shows no clear consensus in relation to activity, in particular physical activity and links to offending. Some commentators argue that there are both individual benefits such as increased self-esteem, and links to crime reduction from participation on such programmes.³⁹ Other authors are more critical.⁴⁰

This research aimed to explore what participation in the RoadRunners involved from the perspective of programme participants. Before participating in the RoadRunners all of the young men interviewed had some involvement in the juvenile justice system. Seven of the eight participants were disengaged from the education system. Their time was characterised by boredom and offending.

The research found that participation on the RoadRunners was a positive experience for all interviewed. The activities provided them with new experiences and the chance to develop new skills, including teamwork; the programme also provided the young men with a constructive way to spend their time during the week. Staff played a crucial role on the programme and both the staff members and the RoadRunners itself were viewed as distinct from Young Person's Probation.

After completing the RoadRunners, six of the eight participants re-engaged with the education system and four of the participants self-reported changes in attitudes towards offending and their offending behaviour. Participants also reported changes in how they spent their leisure time.

In line with the work of Miles⁴¹ and Astbury et al.⁴², this research found that

38 Kilkelly, *Youth Justice*.

39 Miles, *The Academy*; Nichols, *Crime and Punishment*.

40 Smith and Waddington, *Sports in the Community*; T. Crabbe, "A Sporting Chance? Using Sport to Tackle Drug Use and Crime", *Drugs Education Prevention and Policy* 7(4) (2000).

41 Miles, *The Academy*.

42 Astbury et al., *Fairbridge*.

the activities on the RoadRunners provided participants with a medium for personal and social development. The activities also provided what Nichols has termed a 'diversion mechanism'.⁴³ The RoadRunners provided a diversion from boredom and behaviour associated with it such as offending. This notion of the diversion mechanism has not been given significant attention in the literature to date. This research found that the RoadRunners staff acted as mentors for participants, and importantly were viewed as separate to the juvenile justice system. The mentor role of staff in juvenile justice interventions needs to be addressed in greater detail in future research, to give both Probation Officers and social workers who intervene with young offenders and young people at risk a greater insight into how staff can best provide valuable support.

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