SPECIAL ISSUE ON DESISTANCE
Edited by Fergus McNeill

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DESISTANCE LITERATURE AND RESEARCH has established key messages about what can help people to move away from offending, and has acted as a welcome bulwark against the ‘risk’ and ‘what works’ agenda, which, although useful and important, are on their own, incapable of being holistic. ‘Desistance’ reaffirms that those who come to the criminal justice system are whole beings with strengths as well as needs. Moreover, and most importantly for services, it offers reassurance to those working on the ground that the relationship between the worker and service user is vital to effective practice (McNeill et al. 2005).

How did it ever come to the point that we needed to be reminded of this, particularly considering Scotland’s distinctive welfare approach in the area of youth justice? The landmark Kilbrandon Report (1964) led to the establishment of the Children’s Hearings system. This sets out that all children, no matter what the reasons for referral, require care and protection above all else. Over the past thirteen years Includem has worked intensively with over 3,500 of the most vulnerable children and families in Scotland, many of whom have been referred because of offending. They are helped to deal with multiple complex issues, and even though they are young...
many have truly heartbreaking case histories, with homelessness, broken relationships, bereavement, neglect, violence, drug and alcohol abuse not uncommon.

Desistance literature and research has helped to inform Includem’s practice, however, ultimately the main limitation of this approach is that its starting point for intervention begins when the person has been labelled an ‘offender’. Equally, by focusing on the individual the questions that should be asked of society can remain unanswered. Most crime is committed by those who live in poverty. This therefore is a social justice issue, and rescuing people at the point of crisis fails to address the bigger picture. It is time we recognised that as a society we are failing many of our children, and therefore although desistance literature and research can be useful, we should not be complacent in accepting that just helping young people to stop offending is good enough.

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It is estimated that early identification and support saves local authorities at least £3 million a year (Includem, 2012). The impact on both the individual and society is arguably immeasurable. However, Includem has found that many young people are weary of professionals and therefore reaching out and being persistent is important. For example, support is primarily delivered through home visits, often in the evenings and at weekend, and some of which are unplanned if previous contact was missed or refused. This extra effort is appreciated and through this a truer picture of the child’s life may be pieced together. The young people report valuing their worker’s reliability and feeling listened to and understood (Includem, 2012b).

In 2012, the service developed the role of Practice Champion to ensure that delivery is informed by the young person’s perspective. Workers are passionate about the need to never lose sight of the fact that these are children, and having fun and raising their levels of self-esteem by, for example, taking them out for an activity is crucial; an aspect of both the risk and ‘what works agenda’ which is totally overlooked. Includem may carry out offending focused work to try to understand the underlying reasons for poor behaviour; however, this is one aspect of the bigger picture, and one aspect of the person. Essentially, workers see these young people as young people first and foremost, and the focus is about looking and planning towards a better future. Supporting desistance may be a part of this but it is not the main driver of practice.

The desistance paradigm usefully reflects the importance of working with the individual within their social context: that is, both in terms of their community and the individuals around them, and to identify the opportunities which may be accessed. Although a young person has access to support round the clock, whenever they need it most, Includem also wants the young person to develop their own networks, both in their local community and to strengthen family support. One of our main aims is to help prevent family breakdown and the unnecessary use of residential care. Therefore, as well as working with the young person, parents are assisted to address their issues too, for example, by connecting them to drug or alcohol agencies.

Desistance research has established that labeling someone as an ‘offender’ or troublemaker is destructive, and the difficulty that it creates in moving away from this harmful and potentially disabling identity. Helping young people view themselves in a positive light by recognising early changes may enhance the desistance process (King, 2013), and workers can play a positive role in reinforcing this (Whyte and McNeill, 2007). From the very beginning of engagement, Includem makes the young person aware that they want to get to know the ‘real’ them and erase the negative label. Workers understand that opportunities, that others may take for granted may feel out of reach, and often they have to help the individual build confidence and hope. By looking to the future, young people are supported to put in place steps which make a different
road navigable, for example, by helping them to identify courses at college, and realise that they are capable of and have access to a better life.

Desistance research suggests that moving away from offending is often about supporting people to find something meaningful in their lives. Workers anecdotaly report that helping young people find ‘that spark’, that ‘something that makes them tick’ can mean that everything else then falls into place because they then have the drive and motivation to know where they want to go and who they want to be. Conversely, many young people report feeling that in the past they have often had little access to opportunities, and there is a need to question the realities of where these young people grow up and the great divide now within our society between the ‘have’s’ and the ‘have nots’.

The main limitation of the desistance approach is that intervention is activated as a result of the label of someone being an offender, and although Includem’s activity is mainly in this area, the service is moving to more preventative work. For example, in partnership with local schools, Includem is helping children improve their attendance, prevent exclusion and deal with behavioural issues.

To conclude, desistance theory and research offers guidance and development of effective practice, namely because it offers reassurance that establishing relationships is central to intervention, the importance of being truly holistic, and that this work is unpredictable but worth doing. However, a desistance approach is not good enough in the sense that it should not be the case that a child has to be labeled a troublemaker or an offender, before we as a society care. Desistance as a driver of policy arguably lends itself too readily to practice becoming merely crises management, and at worst complacency. Ideally, a preventative or early intervention rather than reactive approach needs to be promoted and become the main driver of policy and practice in working with young people. When it comes to supporting Scotland’s future adults we need to demand more. This means reconfiguring the problem of crime as being a social justice issue which requires seriously tackling the inequalities faced within today’s society.


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**Case Study**

John was referred to Includem at aged 13 for committing violent offences with the local gang. At the time he felt that everyone viewed him as a ‘bad person’. Includem saw John almost every day for a few months and he was supported to get into a construction course at college and to get a gym pass. He became interested in boxing which he describes as a ‘turning point.’ At the local boxing club he met new friends and was busy training and preparing for fights. He has just had his seventh successful boxing fight, and was both shocked and proud when he recently visited his granny and saw a framed picture on her wall of him winning his last fight.

John feels that four years on he sees himself differently, not as a ‘wee boy jumping about the streets’ but as a young man with a future ahead of him. He is grateful to Includem for the support offered and looking forward to the next chapter of his life.

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