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New Chapters: testing a creative writing intervention on young offenders

Submission date	Recruitment status	[_] Prospectively registered
09/12/2024	No longer recruiting	[X] Protocol
Registration date	**Overall study status**	[_] Statistical analysis plan
09/01/2025	Completed	[_] Results
Last Edited	**Condition category**	[_] Individual participant data
16/12/2025	Mental and Behavioural Disorders	[X] Record updated in last year

Plain English summary of protocol

Background and study aims
The study seeks to evaluate whether a creative writing intervention reduces behavioural difficulties for young people in prison. Young people in the criminal justice system experience greater educational disadvantages and disruptions than those who are not incarcerated, and there has been an increase in levels of violence and behavioural difficulties in the previous years in the young offenders' institutions. There is a lack of robust experimental evidence for arts-based interventions for young people in contact with the criminal justice system. This study will compare the impact on behavioural difficulties of a writing-based intervention for a group of young people in prison who receive the intervention against those who do not. Behavioural difficulties will be measured for both groups both before and after the intervention.

Who can participate?
Boys aged 15-18 years old who are currently serving a custodial sentence or on remand, and have eight weeks remaining on their sentence or until their next court date.

What does the study involve?
Young people in prison will be randomly assigned to receive either a 12-session creative writing intervention, called New Chapters, in addition to their usual education, or continue to just receive their usual education.

What are the possible benefits and risks of participating?
The benefits are taking part in a project that evaluates the efficacy of a writing-based intervention, and helping determine whether this is something that would be useful for other young offenders. All participants also receive a certificate after the research. The risks are that some of the questions on the baseline and follow-up may be distressing or upsetting, and those that do not get assigned to the writing program may feel upset or disheartened.

Where is the study run from?
The research is run by the University of Manchester, and the intervention is run by the National Literacy Trust. The study is based at four Young Offenders' Institutions in England: Werrington, Wetherby, Feltham, Oakhill and Oasis Restore.

When is the study starting and how long is it expected to run for?
The pilot phase began in June 2024 and will run for 18 months, until January 2026.

Who is funding the study?
The Youth Endowment Fund is funding the study

Who is the main contact?
Dr Charlotte Lennox, University of Manchester, charlotte.lennox@manchester.ac.uk

Contact information

Type(s)
Public, Scientific, Principal investigator

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Additional identifiers

Protocol serial number
2024-1053

Study information

Scientific Title
Using a creative writing programme (New Chapters) to improve behavioural difficulties for young people in prison: a randomised controlled trial

Acronym
New Chapters

Study objectives
Current study hypothesis as of 06/06/2025:
A 12-session creative writing intervention will reduce self-reported behavioural difficulties in 15- to 18-year-old boys who are incarcerated, compared to their normal educational offering.

Previous study hypothesis:
A 12-week creative writing intervention will reduce self-reported behavioural difficulties in 15- to 18-year-old boys who are incarcerated, compared to their normal educational offering.

Ethics approval required
Ethics approval required

Ethics approval(s)
Approved 13/08/2024, University Research Ethics Committee 5 (The Christie Building, The University of Manchester, Manchester, M13 9PL, United Kingdom; +44 (0)161 306 6000; clinicaltrials@manchester.ac.uk), ref: 2024-20067-35057

Primary study design
Interventional

Study design
Two-arm individually randomized (1:1) superiority randomized controlled trial and process evaluation

Study type(s)
Efficacy

Health condition(s) or problem(s) studied
Behavioural change in young offenders aged 15-18 who are incarcerated

Interventions
Current interventions as of 06/06/2025:
Young people in prison will be randomly allocated to receive New Chapters plus Business as Usual (BAU) or BAU alone to evaluate the reduction in behavioural difficulties. Young people will be randomised on a 1:1 basis using concealed random allocation conducted using an online pseudorandom list hosted by Sealedenvelope.com with random permuted blocks of varying sizes. Randomisation will be stratified by site. Those assigned to the intervention will undertake a twelve-session creative writing program in addition to their usual education (BAU), while the control group will continue to receive their usual education (BAU). Baselines will be taken before randomisation, and follow-ups will be taken after randomisation. The intervention initially ran across twelve weeks, with follow-up 90-152 days after randomisation. As of May 2025, the intervention was condensed for twelve sessions to be delivered over six weeks, with follow-up 56-112 days after randomisation.

Previous interventions:
Young people in prison will be randomly allocated to receive New Chapters plus Business as Usual (BAU) or BAU alone to evaluate the reduction in behavioural difficulties. Young people will be randomised on a 1:1 basis using concealed random allocation conducted using an online pseudorandom list hosted by Sealedenvelope.com with random permuted blocks of varying sizes. Randomisation will be stratified by site. Those assigned to the intervention will undertake a twelve-week creative writing program in addition to their usual education (BAU), while the control group will continue to receive their usual education (BAU). Baselines will be taken before randomisation, and follow-ups will be taken 90-152 days after randomisation.

Intervention Type
Behavioural

Primary outcome(s)
Current primary outcome measure as of 06/06/2025:
Self-reported behaviour difficulties measured using the Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire

(SDQ) at baseline and after randomisation (90-152 days post randomisation for the twelve-week program, 56-112 days for the six-week program).

Previous primary outcome measure:
Self-reported behaviour difficulties measured using the Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ) at baseline and 90-152 days post-randomisation

Key secondary outcome(s)
Current secondary outcome measures as of 06/06/2025:
The following secondary outcome measures will be assessed at baseline, and again 90-152 days post-randomisation for the twelve-week program, and 56-112 days post-randomisation for the six-week program:
1. Self-reported empathy measured using the Basic Empathy Scale (BES)
2. Self-reported pro-social identity measured using the Pro-social IDentity Scale (PIDS)
3. Self-reported self-esteem measured using the Self-Esteem Measure for Prisoners (SEM-P)
4. Self-reported mental wellbeing measured using the Short Warwick-Edinburgh Mental Wellbeing Scale (SWEMWBS)
5. Self-reported creativity measured using the Creative Self-Efficacy Scale for Children and Adolescents (CASES)
6. Behaviour incidents measured using behaviour incident data using prison records at follow-up

Previous secondary outcome measures:
The following secondary outcome measures will be assessed at baseline, and again 90-152 days post-randomisation, unless stated:
1. Self-reported empathy measured using the Basic Empathy Scale (BES)
2. Self-reported pro-social identity measured using the Pro-social IDentity Scale (PIDS)
3. Self-reported self-esteem measured using the Self-Esteem Measure for Prisoners (SEM-P)
4. Self-reported mental wellbeing measured using the Short Warwick-Edinburgh Mental Wellbeing Scale (SWEMWBS)
5. Self-reported creativity measured using the Creative Self-Efficacy Scale for Children and Adolescents (CASES)
6. Behaviour incidents measured using behaviour incident data using prison records at follow-up

Completion date
10/01/2026

Eligibility

Key inclusion criteria
Current participant inclusion criteria as of 06/06/2025:
1. Having less than 8 weeks left on sentence, or until their next court date
3. Not able to provide informed consent
3. Parental consent not provided for those under 16 years
4. Requires an interpreter
5. Those presenting a risk to the research or intervention team and/or where they are unable to mix with others in a group setting

Previous participant inclusion criteria:
1. Boys aged 15-18 years old
2. Serving a custodial sentence
3. Having at least 3 months remaining on sentence

Participant type(s)
Other

Healthy volunteers allowed
No

Age group
Mixed

Lower age limit
15 Years

Upper age limit
18 Years

Sex
Male

Total final enrolment
38

Key exclusion criteria
Current participant exclusion criteria as of 06/06/2025:

Previous participant exclusion criteria:
1. On remand
2. Having less than 3 months left on sentence
3. Not able to provide informed consent
3. Parental consent not provided for those under 16 years
4. Requires an interpreter
5. Those presenting a risk to the research or intervention team and/or where they are unable to mix with others in a group setting

Date of first enrolment
13/11/2024

Date of final enrolment
16/09/2025

Locations

Countries of recruitment
United Kingdom

England

Study participating centre

Hmp/yoi Wetherby
H M Young Offenders Institute
York Road
Wetherby
England
LS22 5ED

Study participating centre
Hmp/yoi Werrington
Werrington
Stoke-on-trent
England
ST9 0DX

Study participating centre
Hmp/yoi Feltham a
Bedfont Road
Feltham
England
TW13 4ND

Study participating centre
Oasis Restore Secure School
Sir Evelyn Road
Rochester
England
ME1 3YB

Study participating centre
Oakhill Secure Training Centre
Chalgrove Field
Oakhill
Milton Keynes
England
MK5 6AJ

Sponsor information

Organisation

Funder(s)

Funder type
Charity

Funder Name
Youth Endowment Fund

Alternative Name(s)
YouthEndowFund, YEF

Funding Body Type
Private sector organisation

Funding Body Subtype
Trusts, charities, foundations (both public and private)

Location
United Kingdom

Results and Publications

Individual participant data (IPD) sharing plan
The University of Manchester will create two datasets, one submitted to the Department for Education (DfE) and one to The Office for National Statistics (ONS). Both datasets are held in the Youth Endowment Fund archive by ONS. The datasets generated during and/or analysed during the current study are/will be available. Approved researchers can apply to access YEF data via the Office for National Statistics secure research service. Consent from participants was required and obtained. All identifying data will be removed, and the data available will be anonymised. The data relates to young offenders in prison, and no identifying information will be shared.

IPD sharing plan summary
Available on request

Study outputs

Output type	Details	Date created	Date added	Peer reviewed?	Patient-facing?
Protocol (other)		10/10/2024	16/12/2025	No	No
Study website		11/11/2025	11/11/2025	No	Yes