

The impact of Blagg
on challenging and reducing
offending by young people:
an evaluation of a drama based
offending behaviour workshop

Executive Summary

Centre for Applied Theatre Research

September 2003

1. Introducing the evaluation

This document summarises the findings of an evaluation of a drama based offending behaviour workshop (Blagg) developed by **TiPP, a theatre organisation based at the Drama Department, University of Manchester**. The evaluation aimed to assess the contribution of Blagg to overall service delivery of Youth Offending Teams (Yots) in Manchester and Bury. The evaluation also assesses the contribution Blagg makes to the delivery of Youth Justice Board aims and objectives, in particular, in challenging and reducing offending by young people.

The evaluation tests the effectiveness of an exciting and practical approach to offending behaviour group work. The evaluation findings described in this report highlight the potentially positive contribution drama based projects can make to the development of group work provision for young people at risk of offending. Blagg is an example of a well designed drama project that deals with issues of offending behaviour in a method and style that is relevant to young people and secures high levels of engagement and participation.

The evaluation was commissioned by **Manchester and Bury Youth Offending Teams** and TiPP. It was carried out by Jenny Hughes from the **Centre for Applied Theatre Research (CATR)**, with supervision from senior staff at CATR and consultancy from Dr. Cheryl Simmil-Binning from the Department of Applied Social Science at Lancaster University. The evaluation was commissioned in January 2002 and data collection was carried out from March 2002 to November 2002. Preliminary results of a reconviction study are included in the report. A full reconviction study will be completed by December 2003.

2. What is Blagg?

Blagg is a drama workshop developed by TiPP in 1992 that employs drama tools and techniques to challenge offending behaviour. In response to great interest in the programme from a variety of Yots TiPP have developed Blagg for use with young offenders and young people at risk of offending.

Blagg was originally designed as a one day workshop, but can be adapted and extended to run across two or three days or a series of sessions. The workshop is structured around a fictional character – Joe Blagg - created by participants. The workshop unfolds as the story of Joe's life prior to and after a fictional offence is developed by the group. The final section of the workshop engages the group in rehearsing interventions Joe could have made in the scenarios leading up to the crime in order to avoid the offence. The programme is accompanied by a visually stimulating set and props.

Blagg is an example of applied theatre practice: it evolved from the application of theatre and drama to the objectives of the Criminal Justice system. Blagg takes the bare elements of a creative drama workshop: warm up, create fictional character, exploration of the character's life, warm down - and infuses it with elements drawn from a cognitive behavioural approach, for example, 'freezing' moments in time to explore thoughts and feelings and decision making.

3. Method

The following bullet points summarise the evaluation activities that took place within the research period:

- Six implementations of Blagg within two Yots – Bury and Central Manchester - were evaluated. Data from qualitative interviews and questionnaires with participants and staff, observation of the programme and Yot records were collected and analysed
- The use of Blagg within all teams trained in Blagg across England was monitored up to six months following initial training
- A paper based study and interviews with Yot practitioners implementing an offending behaviour group work programme not using drama were carried out
- A reconviction study, exploring convictions of participants and a locally matched control group one year prior to and post participation or Yot intervention is being carried out. Preliminary results are included in the report although the full study will not be complete until December 2003
- Interviews with the original creators and commissioners of Blagg and a review of relevant literature were carried out
- A review of effective practice literature in offending behaviour group work with young people was carried out
- A secondary aim was to provide Yots across Manchester and Bury and other local audiences with detailed guidelines for improved delivery and effectiveness of Blagg. With this in mind, the evaluation process included making findings available to staff with the aim of developing the use of the programme

4. Sample

33 young people, aged 14 – 17 years, took part in the six Blagg workshops that comprised the case studies. 15 young people took part in Blagg at Bury Yot and 17 young people took part in Blagg at Central Manchester Yot. The programme at Central was a six session programme facilitated by two Yot support workers. The programmes at Bury were two day long workshops, facilitated by two Yot workers. The Bury case studies included two girls groups. The Central Yot participants represented a wider ethnic range than the Bury group; 65% of the central participants were non white, compared with 23% of the Bury group. Cultural, gender and social differences had a significant impact on the implementation and outcomes of the programme at each site and should be considered when planning future programmes.

Offences of participants ranged from criminal damage to robbery. There were important differences between the Bury and Central Yot groups, with the latter containing young people who had committed the serious offence of robbery. Orders amongst participants ranged from Detention and Training orders (n=4), Supervision orders (n=10), Referral orders (n=10), Community Punishment and Rehabilitation order (n=5) to ISSP, Action Plan order and Final Warning (n=1).

Follow up calls to 10 Yots that had been trained in Blagg within the year of the evaluation in England were carried out, to monitor and evaluate wider use and impact of the programme.

5. The impact of Blagg on challenging and reducing offending

The findings show that participating in Blagg has some impact on challenging offending behaviour by young people and can be a valuable tool when used in conjunction with ongoing work. Blagg has most significant impact on young people's awareness of the effect of offending on victims, their awareness of thoughts, feelings and decision making relating to offending and their confidence and self esteem. Increased confidence and self esteem is a frequently reported outcome of taking part in drama. Drama provides supervised opportunities to interact with peers and gain recognition and praise. Questionnaires with young people showed that Blagg may have most impact on young people's awareness of the effect of their relationships with peers on their offending and awareness of the effect of offending on others.

Analysis of qualitative interviews with staff and young people generated a number of themes relating to impact of Blagg on young people's offending:

i. *'Why did we make that choice?' – increased awareness of thoughts, feelings and decision making at the time of the offence*

Young people suggest that the programme 'made them think' about offending, in particular, increasing awareness of thoughts and feelings leading up to an offence. Staff observed increased insight into the cognitive and emotional processes that lead to offending in many participants and comment that Blagg stimulated higher than expected levels of participation in debates about offending.

ii. *'I know not to do it again' - developing effective strategies to avoid trouble in the future*

All young people taking part in Blagg stated that it had helped them see more clearly how they get into trouble and identify ways of staying out of trouble in the future.

iii. *'Just looking at what you can lose by the things that you do' – increased awareness of the personal costs of offending*

Young people and staff identified increased awareness of the personal costs of offending as an impact of taking part in Blagg.

iv. *'What they have to go through after you've done what you've done' – increased awareness of the impact of offending on victims*

Increased awareness of effects of offending on victims was identified as an important impact of the programme by staff and young people. Young people report that they gained the ability to take the perspective of other people from playing different parts or characters in the developing narrative.

- v. *'I didn't realise how many people it did effect' – increased awareness of the impact of offending on the wider community*

Young people and staff identify increased awareness of the impact of offending on the wider community as an impact of taking part in Blagg.

- vi. *'Thinking about how he got led on by his mates' – increased awareness of the involvement of peers in offending*

Increased awareness of the impact of relationships with peers on offending was also a strong theme emerging from interviews with young people. Research on risk factors for young people's offending suggest that peer relationships are salient to young people's offending.

- vii. *'Listening to the ideas of other people' – the positive impact of working in a group with peers*

There is some evidence to suggest that taking part in a group with peers may have some impact on attitudes to offending. Discussing offending with peers may act as a deterrent and increase awareness of the personal costs of particular behaviour through comparing other young people's experiences.

- viii. *'You see the real them' - using Blagg as an informal assessment tool*

Staff suggest that a young person's responses within the workshop often revealed more about a young person than ongoing one to one work. Participation in Blagg highlighted important issues that could be fed into ongoing work or through appropriate referrals. Young people play out different roles in different contexts. The fictional settings created within the narrative and group work setting presented staff with an opportunity to view the different 'performances' young people play out with peers and in other contexts in their lives. This helps young people become more aware of the different roles they play and encourages them to test a wider and more detailed range of thoughts, feelings and responses, including alternative responses to pressures and trigger scenarios that lead to offending.

Preliminary results from **the reconviction study** support the findings of the qualitative analysis: that participation in Blagg makes a useful contribution to reducing and challenging offending by young people as part of an ongoing programme of work within Yots. 10 young people have been reconvicted since participation in Blagg, a reconviction rate of 30.3%. This compares to a reconviction rate of 39% in the control group. Caution needs to be shown in interpreting reconviction data: information currently available is only partial and differences in the way case study groups were selected can account for some change shown. The problems with reconviction data have been well documented, for example, the relationship between convictions and offending has been questioned. Reconviction data cannot explain why and how young people benefit from any intervention. It is difficult to attribute any change in offending to a single intervention such Blagg within a wider programme of interventions facilitated by Yots. Finally, low numbers of young people in the sample limit the scope of the findings and a more extensive study should be carried out before any more conclusive interpretations are made.

6. How drama might ‘work’

The findings of this evaluation make an important contribution to the growing theory and evidence base about how drama and theatre can be applied to deliver a range of objectives. The following bullet points summarise the main features of the emerging theory base or series of mechanisms by which drama might ‘work’ to challenge and reduce offending (according to the evidence generated within this evaluation) and have other positive outcomes for young people at risk. The concepts outlined below should be used to plan and carry out further research and evaluation in applied theatre:

- Taking part in performance and role play helps young people learn to create and adapt ‘performances’ – the way the self is presented – in different contexts, including rehearsing alternative responses to pressures and trigger scenarios that lead to offending. Psychological role theory - suggests that learning how to perform and adapt to different roles (in life as well as in play) are important life skills
- Yot staff facilitating the workshop identify the liberating impact of the fictional character as instrumental in challenging offending behaviour – young people were more likely to explore the thoughts and feelings of the victim of the fictional offence (many young people defend themselves by minimising the impact of their own offence), more clearly articulate their thoughts and feelings about the personal costs of their offending
- A drama workshop and performance provides a metaphorical or fictional realm/context outside of day to day life and this can allow for greater freedom of expression and the performance of feelings that are prohibited in other social settings. Staff become more aware of a young person and the roles they play and can therefore work with them in more targeted and focussed ways following participation in a drama workshop. Young people become more aware of thoughts and feelings and can consider alternative behaviours
- Young people create the fictional character and his or her story during the course of the workshop. Many participants show a level of identification with the fictional character created and suggest that they related the lessons learnt directly to their own lives
- Blagg ‘works’ not because it rehearses young people in particular behaviours but because this rehearsal *prepares* young people to respond to other people and social moments more fluidly and effectively. This is not simply about understanding the victim’s point of view, but the ability to understand a range of perspectives and widen emotional repertoires
- Drama is a non traditional means of engaging young people in learning and skills development and may be more suitable to the learning styles of excluded young people. Young people report that they develop stronger relationships with Yot staff as a consequence of taking part in an enjoyable and social structured activity with them
- The opportunity to take part in a positive group activity with peers and gain recognition and praise increases confidence and self esteem

7. How to facilitate the workshop successfully – what works?

Young people overwhelmingly reported that they found the programme enjoyable, worthwhile and relevant. Blagg stimulated detailed discussions of offending and an exploration of thoughts, feelings and decision making involved in offending, at a level of depth and detail that often surprised staff and led to an observable increase in insight into offending behaviour for some participants. Staff also valued the flexibility of the programme – its ability to be adapted to address particular issues and needs of participants

Of the 33 young people that started the workshops, only four did not complete the programme (for reasons unrelated to the workshop). The high completion rate suggests that the structure, length and content of Blagg was relevant to and engaged young people that were referred. In addition, good management of groups, from positive relationships with staff to practical issues such as willingness of staff to give young people lifts to and from sessions may have been factors contributing to high levels of participation. Staff enthusiasm and commitment to the programme was a key factor in the successful implementation of Blagg.

Staff and young people identified a number of ‘facilitating factors’ involved in the successful implementation of Blagg, including:

- A friendly, informal atmosphere
- Staff involvement in games and role plays
- Staff’s positive reinforcement and encouragement and the focus on enjoyment of the programme
- An active, participatory approach
- Determination of staff to persist, even when concentration was poor
- Using language relevant to young people
- Good co-working and support between facilitators
- Respectful approach of facilitators
- Consistent application of the rules, although an element of informality and flexibility is important
- Opportunities to develop confidence as a leader by observing other people running the programme with young people
- Opportunities to develop confidence in leading skills by repeated experience of running the programme

8. Effective group work practice and Blagg

The evaluation compares the outcomes and processes of participation in Blagg to principles of effective practice in offending behaviour group work with young people identified in other literature. The following table summarises the most important aspects of this comparison.

<i>Effective practice:</i>	<i>Blagg:</i>
Approaches with children and young people need to be part of an intervention that targets family and community factors as well as individual thinking	Blagg is carried out within a context of ongoing work with young people
Interventions should adhere to the risk principle – more intensive programmes aimed at high risk offenders and vice versa	The fictional offence and story reflects and represents the issues of participants and can therefore be tailored to specific needs and avoid being ‘too interventionist’. The programme can be developed to address a wide variety of different offences and risk factors
Programmes should focus on ‘criminogenic’ needs, that is, directly focus on factors that cause offending	Blagg focuses on reasoning/ thinking skills, decision making, awareness of consequences and effect of offending on victims. It also addresses self esteem issues
Programmes should match young people’s learning styles: they should include an active, participatory approach, set realistic and achievable targets for participants, be appropriate to age/maturity levels and be enjoyable. Structured, directive approaches – combining a teaching approach with creative thinking and problem solving are more effective with young people than unstructured approaches	Blagg employs an active and participatory approach that varies in format between physical activity, creative work, discussion, reflection, and observation. Young people report that they enjoyed taking part and welcomed working with staff in an informal environment. Staff report high levels of engagement with the programme in most cases
Programmes should take place in a community setting – within the young person’s environment, so that learning can be readily practiced in real life	Blagg can be facilitated in a wide range of contexts
Programme planning and integrity are important, but the principle of flexibility is also important. Programmes should offer flexibility whilst retaining this integrity so as to respond to issues and group/individual needs	Blagg provides a strong structure or narrative flow that does not alter. However, the content of the narrative is entirely flexible and responsive to participants. Programme length and session times can be adapted
The level of motivation to change of the young person may be a key factor related to positive outcomes. Programmes may need to take account of this by including motivational interventions at the start of the programme	Blagg starts by exploring a fictional offence and it’s consequences for the offender, victim and wider community. The aim is to motivate participants to want to change the outcome for Joe when re-visiting the trigger moments leading up to the offence and changing the way Joe deals with them

Assessment/referral processes and targeting of participants for programmes need to be planned	Yot staff are responsible for assessment and referral processes. Staff need support to ensure that they have adequate time to plan assessment processes and prepare for the overall programme
Training should include opportunities to learn about the theoretical base of the programme as well as how the programme is to be delivered. Developing staff's competence in group work skills is an important part of maximising engagement and participation of young people	Staff found training positive, informative and enjoyable. The theory base for Blagg is rooted in a combination of a cognitive behavioural approach and applied theatre. TiPP should use the theory sections of the evaluation report to inform future training. Where staff are inexperienced in group work, delivery of Blagg may be enhanced by involving staff in further training in basic group work
All programmes should involve a clear commitment to anti discriminatory practice - the needs of young people from different backgrounds should be taken into account	A consideration of anti-discriminatory practice should be a routine part of planning and preparation for Blagg
A commitment to and knowledge of the programme from all staff within the Yot is important, with regular communication planned in	The evaluation shows that staff need support from managers to ensure that they have adequate time to plan and prepare for the programme and liaise with personal officers
Clear programme manuals have also been identified as a mark of good practice in group work	Staff feel the manual is clear and user friendly, but have identified areas for its development

9. Recommendations

The evaluation findings suggest that Blagg can be developed in the following areas:

- Clearly communicating the specific aims and objectives of the programme to young people may increase commitment to the programme and the positive outcomes of participation
- Further research is needed to assess how young people apply the learning gained through Blagg to their own lives, for example by carrying out follow up interviews with young people up to a year after participation and completing the reconviction study. Further research and evaluation may also help to identify the impacts and outcomes of Blagg in different local contexts and provide more information on the contribution of Blagg to enhanced interaction/relationship building between Yots and young people and other findings useful to wider audiences of the programme

The following recommendations are made to staff and Yot teams implementing Blagg:

- Encouraging young people to try out different solutions to problems within the workshop is as important as coming up with the ‘right’ answer as it provides an opportunity to experiment with a range of thoughts, feelings and behaviours to the same stimulus and develops a young person’s ability to adapt to and change situations in their own lives more effectively
- Staff responsible for Blagg need to allocate adequate time to plan sessions, gather information about referrals, provide feedback to personal officers and rehearse programme delivery. This will involve allocating at least the same time as they spend with participants to plan whilst developing their confidence in and knowledge in the programme. Yot managers should consider reducing staff case loads in the early stages of getting Blagg off the ground within Yots
- Where staff are inexperienced in group work, delivery of Blagg may be enhanced by involving staff in further training in basic group work skills
- Continued allocation of time and resources from Yots to build in troubleshooting days (one off sessions offered by TiPP post training) is important as it can improve staff’s confidence in and knowledge of the programme and offer ideas for development of key exercises
- TiPP and all Yots running the programme should consider how they can provide opportunities for staff to see the programme working with young people prior to their delivery of it, as this increases staff confidence in their ability to deliver the programme. This might involve opportunities to observe practice by TiPP or other Yots. In addition, additional events or resources for e.g. a seminar or conference, the production of supporting literature possibly including a visual resource such as a video should be considered

The following developments to the manual and training programme are recommended:

- Staff would find the inclusion of descriptions of more games that work well with young people helpful
- The training includes many ideas about how to adapt and extend the workshop and specific exercises for young people that are not included in the manual; staff need a way of quickly referencing these ideas beyond the training event. TiPP should consider producing a revised manual or additional material for Yots
- A section on strategies for working with resistant groups may also be helpful, including ways to encourage increased participation in exercises, ways of working with minimising/denying impact of offending and possible extensions and developments of key exercises

**A limited number of full reports have been produced. For a copy, please contact
TiPP, Drama Department, University of Manchester, Oxford Road,
Manchester, M13 9PL
Telephone: 0161 275 3047 E mail: tipp@man.ac.uk**

**Alternatively, the report can be downloaded for free from TiPP’s website:
www.tipp.org.uk**