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Prisoners' participation and involvement in prison life: Examining the possibilities and boundaries

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Introduction

The participation and involvement of prisoners in prison life are themes that have recently moved up political agendas in Europe. Article 50 of the European Prison Rules (EPR) stipulates: 'Subject to the needs of good order, safety and security, prisoners shall be allowed to discuss matters relating to general conditions of imprisonment and shall be encouraged to communicate with the prison authorities about these matters'; article 27.6 states that 'recreational opportunities, which include sport, games, cultural activities, hobbies and other leisure pursuits, shall be provided and, as far as possible, prisoners shall be allowed to organise them' (Council of Europe, 2006). These rules indicate that prisoners are seen as active citizens rather than just passive recipients of services (Edgar et al., 2011). This increasing awareness and appeal for more participation seems to be contrary to the essence of prisons. Although correctional institutions control and constrain individuals' autonomy and choices (Hannah-Moffat, 2000), according to Woodall et al. (2013) their task could be to create more empowered individuals and give them the possibility of taking control over their own life following release from prison. However, 'we rarely hear about the good work being done in prisons or the men and women who have grown up, matured and changed their lives while incarcerated' (Inderbitzin, Walraven, et al., 2016: page 86). This study aims to provide an insight into the different types of prisoners' participation and involvement in prison life that are available, the advantages and disadvantages thereof, and the processes that can enhance or limit their participation and involvement in prison life.

Types of prisoners' participation and involvement in prison life

Ladder of citizen participation: different levels of participation and involvement

Arnstein (1969) developed the 'ladder of citizen participation' and identified different levels of participation, as 'there is a critical difference between going through the empty ritual of participation and having the real power

needed to affect the outcome of the process' (1969: page 216). His ladder contains eight participation levels that each indicate the degree of power citizens have in determining the end product. The two bottom rungs are called manipulation and therapy, and are considered as levels of 'non-participation'. The next three levels are informing, consultation and placation, also called 'levels of tokenism'. Citizens receive information, and are consulted or asked to provide advice, but the right to take decisions is retained by the power holders. Partnership, delegated power and citizen control are the last three rungs, and are also called degrees of citizen power. Partnership means that citizens engage and negotiate with power holders, while at the level of delegated power and citizen control citizens have control over the decision-making process (Arnstein, 1969).

More recently, this ladder of citizen participation has been applied to the participation of prisoners (e.g. Nacro, 2014; Taylor, 2014) and is limited to five levels. The bottom rung is informing, meaning that objective information is provided to prisoners about their rights and ways to participate in the organisation (Taylor, 2014), or to help them to understand problems, alternatives, opportunities and solutions (Nacro, 2014). The next level is consulting; the views of prisoners have been sought (Taylor, 2014) and the prison management commits to act on these views, if possible. Consulting prisoners can be by means of surveys, panel discussions, suggestion boxes or focus group interviews (Nacro, 2014). The third rung is involving; this indicates that prisoners' concerns, aspirations and advice are fed into decision-making processes. On this level, prisoners are thus involved in decision making to some degree. The fourth rung is collaborating (Nacro, 2014; Taylor, 2014); this implies that prisoners participate in identifying problems, and discussing possible solutions or alternatives (Nacro, 2014). Decisions are taken in partnership with prisoners (Taylor, 2014). The highest rung is called devoting by Nacro (2014) and empowering by Taylor (2014), both indicating that prisoners are responsible for making (some) management decisions by themselves.

Thematic classification of prisoners' participation and involvement in prison life

In addition to the level of participation, the literature identifies and describes different thematic types of prisoner participation and involvement in prison life: (1) participating in prison activities, (2) democratic participation, and (3) peer-based interventions.

Participating in prison activities

International instruments such as the Standard Minimum Rules for the Treatment of Prisoners (United Nations, 1955) and the European Prison Rules (Council of Europe, 2006) state that prisoners have the right to access cultural

activities, educational courses, sports activities, vocational programmes, etc. These programmes can be collectively referred to as ‘prison activities’ (Brosens et al., 2016). The literature on prisoners’ participation in prison activities draws a distinction between participation in activities that are targeted primarily at preparing for life after release (e.g. educational courses, vocational training, work) and activities to deal with prison life (e.g. leisure time activities) (Drenkhahn, 2014a, b).

It is increasingly recognised that participation in prison activities can have positive effects on several outcomes. Prisoners benefit from taking part in activities such as preparing for life after prison, as they develop the skills to assist their reintegration into society (Easton, 2011) and improve their employment prospects after release (Alós et al., 2015). Programmes to deal with prison life also have positive effects for individual prisoners. For instance, prisoners may improve their literacy skills by going to the library (Greenberg et al., 2007), and those who participate in sports have better physical health (Gallant et al., 2015). Moreover, the prison as an institution may benefit. For example, prisoners who participate in sports activities are less likely to be involved in disciplinary violations during their time in prison (Martos-García et al., 2009; Meek and Lewis, 2014).

Democratic participation in prison

A second type of prisoners’ participation or involvement in prison life is democratic participation, meaning that prisoners are actively involved in decision making about the prison regime (Edgar et al., 2011). The democratic participation of prisoners can take the form of prisoner councils, prisoner forums, inmate committees, representative councils, or consultative committees (Bishop, 2006; Solomon and Edgar, 2004). The European Prison Rules also refer to democratic participation – although they do not use this term explicitly – by mentioning that prisoners shall be allowed to discuss matters relating to the general conditions of imprisonment, and that they shall be encouraged to communicate with the prison authorities regarding these matters (Council of Europe, 2006). This communication must allow prisoners to express complaints and comments on the working of the prison and suggest possible changes (Bishop, 2006).

Research on prisoners’ democratic participation is scarce. In 2004, Solomon and Edgar investigated ‘the work of prisoner councils’ in England and Wales and described two different types. First, there are prisoner councils that encompass prison representatives from different wings and are charged with discussing prison-wide issues. Secondly there are wing forums that represent prisoners from a certain wing and only discuss topics relevant to that wing (Solomon and Edgar, 2004). Another form of democratic participation can be found in certain prisons in the USA where there are prisoner-led clubs that represent diverse cultural groups, needs and interests within the

prison. Examples are Alcoholics Anonymous, Athletic Club, Lifers' Unlimited Club, or the Latino Club. Each club has a club-leader who has been elected after nomination by their peers. These club-leaders are responsible for representing their members, negotiating with the prison administration and other clubs within the prison, and standing up for prisoners who are not able to advocate for themselves (Inderbitzin, Cain, et al., 2016).

As with prisoners' participation in prison activities, there are also positive outcomes related to prisoners' democratic participation. It can reinforce principles of democracy as prisoners are shown that their voices count (Inderbitzin, Cain, et al., 2016), and the relationships between prisoners and prison staff may be improved thus resulting in a better atmosphere within the prison (Bishop, 2006; Champion and Aguiar, 2013). Democratic participation can also contribute to improvements in the working of the prison (Champion and Aguiar, 2013; Edgar et al., 2011), as it can help to highlight where progress and improvements are needed or required in the future (Champion and Aguiar, 2013).

Peer-based interventions

The final type of prisoner participation is peer-based interventions. These have been used in various sectors to deal with diverse problems. For instance, peer-based interventions have been used in psychiatry and mental health care (Leggatt and Woodhead, 2016; Mead et al., 2001), higher education (Byl et al., 2015), and oncology (Huntingdon et al., 2016). The literature on peer-based interventions in prison makes a distinction between peer education and peer support (Bagnall et al., 2015; South et al., 2017). The international review of Bagnall and colleagues (2005) on the effectiveness and cost-effectiveness of peer education and peer support in prison has demonstrated that in particular *peer education* in relation to HIV prevention and risk reduction has been widely applied in prisons. An example of peer education can be found in the Irish Red Cross volunteer inmate programme 'Health and First Aid prison volunteer scheme' which has been implemented in all prisons in Ireland. Prisoners receive training and then become peer-to-peer-educators who promote hygiene, health and first aid among fellow prisoners (Mehay and Meek, 2016). Peer education can also touch on issues other than health. In England, there is the Toe-by-Toe programme through which prisoners give literacy training to fellow prisoners with the aim of teaching them to read and write (Perrin and Blagden, 2016). Furthermore, some prisons in England also employ peer mentors. These peer mentors are present in classrooms to support fellow prisoners who are following an educational course, and help learners to complete their paperwork correctly and encourage them to follow up their assignments (Brosens and De Donder, 2016).

A second type of peer-based intervention is *peer support*. Here the idea is that people give and receive help based on the key principles of respect, shared responsibility and mutual agreement on what is helpful in a certain situation. People try to understand one another's situation empathically as they share emotional and psychological pain (Mead et al., 2001). There are two formally organised types of peer support in the prison system. First, there are peer support programmes focusing on providing basic information to recently arrived prisoners, for instance insider schemes in the UK (Boothby, 2011; Edgar et al., 2011; Perrin and Blagden, 2016), and prison orientation in Australia (Devilly et al., 2005). These programmes aim to provide basic information, reassurance and practical support to prisoners who are recent arrivals in prison (Boothby, 2011; Perrin and Blagden, 2016). In other words, prisoners are informed about the policies, procedures and realities of prison life by fellow prisoners (Devilly et al., 2005). The support insiders provide is offered only during the first days of incarceration (Boothby, 2011; Perrin and Blagden, 2016).

A second type of peer support focuses on providing emotional support and preventing suicide. For instance, in the UK there are listener schemes. The task of listeners is to provide confidential emotional support to fellow prisoners, and prisoners can have confidential conversations with listeners during the full period of their incarceration (Edgar et al., 2011; Perrin and Blagden, 2016). Listener schemes have been introduced to reduce the high rates of suicide among the prison population (Perrin and Blagden, 2016). Other countries have also introduced peer-to-peer programmes to prevent suicide in prison. For instance, the 'SAM's in the Pen' programme in Canada is a collaboration between the Samaritans of Southern Alberta and a prison. Similar to listener schemes in the UK, prisoners can ask for a confidential conversation with a SAM-volunteer 24/7 (Hall and Gabor, 2004). France also has the 'co-détenu support'-programme (CDS). The task of CDS-prisoners is to identify and support fellow prisoners who are at risk of suicide (Auzoult and Abdellaoui, 2013).

Aim

As Abrams and colleagues (2016: page 12) state: 'Although prisoners have historically supported one another behind bars in many informal ways, little to no scholarship has examined the meaning and experiences of those who become volunteers and leaders in this capacity'. Against this background, this study aims to contribute to a deeper understanding of the participation/involvement roles prisoners can fulfil behind bars. The study has two central research questions:

RQ1: What different types of prisoner participation and involvement in prison life exist within one remand prison in Flanders (Belgium), and how do prisoners and prison staff experience these different types (cf. lived experiences)?

RQ2: Which processes are shown to enhance or limit prisoners' participation and involvement in prison life?

The focus group research

For a number of reasons, we used focus groups to gain an insight into the different types of activities through which prisoners could be involved in prison life in a remand prison in Flanders (Belgium). First, focus groups are guided group discussions which aim to create an understanding of participants' experiences and beliefs (Krueger and Casey, 2014). Secondly, focus groups enable discussion between participants through which other issues may emerge which may not otherwise arise from individual interviews (Liamputtong, 2011). They are guided by a moderator who raises topics that needs to be discussed (Krueger and Casey, 2014). The moderator uses a semi-structured topic list as this allows him to bring up relevant topics without preventing participants from speaking freely and comfortably.

A participatory research project

As the value of collaborative research projects in prison has recently been acknowledged (e.g. Brosens et al. , 2015; Walsh et al., 2014), we developed our research project in close collaboration with people affected by and/or responsible for action on the topics studied (Jagosh et al., 2012) – professionals working in the prison. Together, the researchers and the professionals formed a steering committee which would be responsible for designing, planning, implementing, coordinating and evaluating the different phases of the research. They made decisions about the methodology, but also discussed the results and organised a colloquium to present the results to prisoners and to a wider audience. It was judged that prisoners would be more central to providing information and feedback if they were an official part of the steering committee. Due to security reasons, we were not allowed to involve them more structurally.

Another collaborative aspect of the research project was the fact that 11 professionals working in the prison received training on how to conduct focus groups. The training was organised by the researcher and consisted of a theoretical module on how to organise, moderate, structure and analyse focus groups. The 11 focus groups that were organised for this project formed the test case for this training. The researcher moderated five focus groups while one or two participants of the training course observed them. The other six focus groups were on each

occasion moderated by a participant of the training course, while another participant took notes. The author of this article observed these focus groups and provided feedback immediately after the focus group was finished. In the event that the moderator forgot to raise any relevant topics during the focus group, the researcher informed the moderator.

Participants and procedures

Eleven focus groups representing a wide range of views and profiles were held between March and June 2015. Seventy-eight people took part in the focus groups and group sizes ranged from five to nine participants. Five groups of prisoners (in total 36 prisoners – 31 males and 5 females) were interviewed during the focus group conversations. As the prison where the research took place had a prisoner council, it was obvious that representatives in one focus group should be involved. Besides, we also questioned prisoners who were not participating in the prisoner council. Among them, we conducted one focus group in Dutch (i.e. the official language spoken in the prison) and one in French. The prison where the research took place also houses ‘people lacking criminal responsibility’. These people ‘are deemed criminally irresponsible for their criminal actions because of mental illness or intellectual disability’ (De Smet et al., 2016: page 35). The fourth and fifth focus group were organised to hear the perspective and experiences of this subpopulation.

The participants of the other six focus groups were diverse professionals. In Belgium, there is a difference between those professionals who are responsible for providing security and those responsible for organising activities. The import model has been introduced, implying that activities offered to prisoners should be equivalent to those available outside prison. Accordingly, the ordinary public sector is tasked with offering activities within the prison walls. A first focus group was conducted with professionals from the public sector – also called ‘activity providers’ – including two volunteers. There is also a group of people who coordinate these activities, and a focus group was conducted with this group. Moreover, two focus groups were organised with prison guards (i.e. professionals responsible for providing security), and one with religious personnel. Finally, there is a steering committee that is responsible for the participation and involvement of prisoners in prison life in the prison where our research took place. This group comprises a prison manager, activity providers and prison guards. A focus group interview was also conducted with them. Table 1 provides an overview of the number of participants in each focus group. All respondents were selected in close cooperation with the general coordinator for the prison activities of the respective prison.

Table 1. Overview of respondents of the focus group interviews.

Focus group	Number of participants
Prisoners	36
Dutch-speaking prisoners (not participating in the prisoner council)	9
French-speaking prisoners (not participating in the prisoner council)	6
Criminally irresponsible offenders with a mental disability (not participating in the prisoner council)	8
Criminally irresponsible offenders with intellectual disabilities (not participating in the prisoner council)	5
Representatives of the prisoner council	8
Professionals	42
Activity providers	8
Coordination team of activities for prisoners	9
Prison guards (group 1)	9
Prison guards (group 2)	5
Religious personnel	4
Steering committee responsible for active participation and involvement of prisoners in prison life	7

All focus groups lasted between 90 minutes and 2 hours. The researcher used a semi-structured topic list, but left room for additional issues mentioned by the respondents. Three general topics were discussed: (1) the levels of prisoners' involvement in prison life on the participation ladder; (2) positive and negative experiences with prisoners' participation and involvement in prison life; and (3) the preconditions for realising this. Each of the focus group discussions began with general questions about the participation initiatives that existed within the prison, followed by more specific questions (e.g. What is the profile of prisoners who are taking part? Which competences do these prisoners need?). There was also an assistant moderator who took notes to monitor participants' non-verbal behaviour and the general atmosphere of the discussion. The focus groups were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. MaxQDA software package was used to analyse the data. A thematic analysis was performed to systematically identify the main themes (King and Horrocks, 2010). Three researchers analysed the focus groups separately, after which they discussed their results until a consensus was reached.

Before the commencement of the focus groups, all participants read and signed an informed consent form to declare that they were informed about the goals of the research, that they participated voluntarily, that their identity was not revealed, and that they agreed to the focus group being recorded.

Results

Different types of prisoners' participation and involvement in prison life

The participation pyramid

During the focus groups, respondents received a paper with the image of a participation ladder with five participation rungs (i.e. informing, consulting, involving, collaborating and devoting/empowering – Nacro, 2014;

Taylor, 2014). Respondents were asked to reflect on the participation initiatives available to prisoners at each different level. A group of professionals responsible for organising diverse activities in this particular prison commented that for them it seemed that using the symbol of the ladder assumed that the lower participation rungs were inferior to the higher ones, as you have to climb the ladder. They also considered the lower rungs to be valuable, and that not everyone had to reach the higher levels. In the rest of this article, we use the term ‘participation pyramid’ instead of ‘ladder’, effectively indicating that the lower levels covered most of the participants.

The first level of the participation pyramid is *informing*. Respondents in all the different focus groups indicated that prisoners were informed orally (e.g. through prison guards, activity providers), or in writing (e.g. through posters, flyers, information panels) regarding all sorts of matters (e.g. activities, working of the prison). In general, professionals indicated that a lot of information was provided, and that it was available in different languages and different formats. Many offenders lacking criminal responsibility agreed with this, although Dutch-speaking prisoners felt that the onus was on them to search and ask for information, except when the information was delivered to their cell (i.e. flyers). For instance, one said:

Sometimes I ask a prison guard something. Then he says: ‘You can go to this or that service’, for instance to the Judicial Welfare Work. You have to ask it first and then the guard says ‘you can go to that person or that service’. (Dutch-speaking prisoner, Male, 23 years).

Where information was received on paper, its meaning was not always clear, particularly for recent arrivals in the prison:

Information, hmm. You get the rules and regulations when you arrive in prison, you get the regulations but that’s it. You have to unravel it on your own. You have to ask other people questions about how everything really works (Dutch-speaking prisoner, Male, 28 years).

[...] Normally, when you arrive here you have to see the prison manager. He can give you more information. But I have to say, I’ve never seen the prison manager (Male, 37 years).

[...] Indeed, when you first come into prison, you don’t get a lot of information. You don’t know anything, they lock you up and that’s it. You have to ask everything later on (Male, 65 years).

Although professionals thought they provided enough information when a person arrived in prison, some prisoners mentioned that arriving in prison is a hectic period and they did not remember the information they received at that time. French-speaking prisoners noted that they did not even reach this bottom level of the participation pyramid, as all information was provided in Dutch (see ‘processes that enhance or limit’).

The next level of the participation pyramid is *consulting*. An example given by an activity provider was a questionnaire which was recently distributed among the prison population to investigate their educational preferences. Representatives of the prisoner council and steering committee members also mentioned a suggestion box in the library in which prisoners could note their suggestions regarding the activities on offer. Many Dutch-speaking prisoners were aware of the suggestion box, but in many cases they did not use it, because they lacked information about the ‘rules of play’: why, how, and for what? They were concerned about their privacy; it was not clear who would read their ideas and what would be done with the information. Some also thought that they had to seek the permission of a prison guard to leave a letter in the suggestion box. Members of the steering committee believed that the impersonal nature of the system may explain why not many prisoners used the suggestion box:

I think it has to do with the impersonal approach. If you could personally ask people [...]. It’s important to have a conversation, give the time and talk together. That directly leads to more results (Male, 42 years).

Or it has to do with the fact that prisoners don’t expect that we will effectively listen to their ideas or that we will take into account their ideas. They’re not used to this (Female, 49 years).

Representatives of the prisoner council also saw this council as a way of consulting with the prison population, while most prison guards and other types of professionals considered this as a method of *involving* prisoners (third level of the participation pyramid). The prisoner council is responsible for providing advice to the prison management about issues of general interest on their own initiative (i.e. form of democratic participation). The representatives of the council noted that they sometimes touched on levels of involvement, but that this depended on the willingness of the professionals to whom they addressed their comment to listen to their opinions. In addition, when the prison management considered implementing a change, they sometimes pro-actively contacted the prisoner council.

There was one prisoner council for the whole prison, including representatives of the different wings (i.e. male prisoners, female prisoners and criminally irresponsible offenders). Confusion arose when questions were posed about the prisoner council during the focus groups with criminally irresponsible offenders, as many of this group did not know that they could participate. Although some of these offenders went to the same activities as the male and female prisoners, many separate activities were organised on their own wing. Some criminally irresponsible offenders discussed the possibility of organising a separate prisoner council. They did not want to be involved in the council for the whole prison, as some of them felt that they were regarded as ‘the fools’ by other prisoners. The other prisoners did not talk about whether or not a separate council should be organised.

Respondents in all focus groups noted that prison life might better reflect the needs of prisoners as a positive result of the prisoner council. For instance, a prison guard stated that the canteen list had been adapted based on the work of the council:

It doesn't matter to me if there's a big bottle of chocolate spread on the canteen list or a cheap one. [...] I think it's interesting to let them (prisoners) speak about this. It may be that there are important things for them, but we don't see them. This can also lead to a certain level of dynamic security¹. So I think it's really interesting to listen to them (Prison guard, Male, 29 years).

Activity providers agreed that it was not just the canteen list that could be adapted to the needs of prisoners, but also other things such as sports activities:

If I say to a prisoner, I'd like to organise that sports activity, it may be that he says 'don't do that. That's not in the mind of prisoners. They won't be interested.' And then you choose to communicate with prisoners about their ideas. If you organise it or at least try to organise it, then you notice that prisoners think 'they listen to me, and they take into account my ideas, I'm not nobody, I'm somebody, I've got a voice and something can be done with it' (Steering committee member, Female, 36 years).

Many prison guards involved in our research shared the view that prisoners could provide advice on certain aspects of prison life (e.g. canteen list, activities), but not on security measures. Security was mentioned only by the prison guards. Other respondents did not touch on this theme when we asked them to name topics about which prisoners could/should provide advice.

Although activity providers were keen to take into account the ideas of the prison population, this was not always easy as they were working in a remand prison with a high population turnover. However, asking about their ideas provided prisoners with the possibility of developing new skills. They learned how to formulate ideas, and by participating in a group they learned how to handle conflicts. These skills could be used in other situations during their detention and also afterwards.

Another example of involving prisoners was that some Dutch-speaking prisoners had been actively involved in providing advice on issues to be included in an action plan concerning the offer and organisation of activities (e.g. which cultural activities, educational courses, or sport activities could be organised). According to activity

¹ "Dynamic security refers to methods of managing the prison that ensure everyone's safety by building good relationships between all staff and prisoners. Dynamic security works by prison staff getting to know prisoners individually" (Edgar et al., 2011: page 48).

providers, activities in which contacts between the prison staff and prisoners were stimulated, such as drafting the action plan, helped to increase the dynamic security within the prison.

When we asked if prisoners were involved on the level of *collaborating*, some Dutch-speaking prisoners mentioned that they would never reach this level of the participation pyramid. Some activity providers shared this conclusion as they felt that prisoners do not believe it was up to them to influence what might happen in prison. Religious representatives, however, indicated that prisoners were involved in choosing texts and music for religious celebrations, which they considered as a form of collaborating:

Once a month we prepare the religious celebration together with a small group of prisoners. Those prisoners write texts, propose songs and in many cases we use their texts and songs, sometimes not. [...] However, it's only a small group of prisoners who are able to write their own texts or propose songs, albeit I try to involve them as much as possible. If someone can draw or read aloud, although he expresses himself imperfectly, I try to give him a voice during the celebrations (Religious representative, 42 years).

However, based on literature that states that consulting implies that prisoners are engaged in identifying problems and discussing possible solutions (Nacro, 2014), we do not consider choosing texts and music for religious celebration as a form of collaborating, but rather as consulting.

Another example of collaborating given by the steering committee and a prison guard was that the working group communication consisted not just of professionals but also included one prisoner who was actively involved during their meetings. By participating in the working group, the prisoner was able to develop several skills (e.g. formulating ideas, conflict handling).

Furthermore, prison guards mentioned the 'prison pedals' project which originated from a competition between four prisons to virtually bike the tour of Flanders and by doing this raising money for charity. For instance, one year the prisoners of the prison in which the research took place decided to give the money raised to a non-profit organisation that arranges summer camps for children and young people living in poverty. Nowadays, there is no longer any competition between the different prisons, but there was still a group of six prisoners who came together once a week to bike on rollers. No prison guard was present in the sports hall during this activity, indicating that prisoners were responsible for developing their own training schedules, making adjustments when needed, motivating each other and so on. They could always consult a prison guard when they had questions or remarks to make.

The prisoners did not reach the upper level of the participation pyramid, *empowering*. An example of this would be where prisoners receive a budget to independently organise activities for other prisoners.

Throughout the different focus groups, mention was made of several positive outcomes for the prisoners themselves and for the prison as an institution. In addition to the possibility of developing new skills, adapting prison life (more) to the needs of prisoners, and increasing dynamic security (as mentioned above), several groups of professionals and prisoners indicated that participation could increase prisoners' self-esteem and self-confidence and taught prisoners to take more responsibility:

If you can do things here inside, for instance creative or other activities, you feel more free, get more confidence and feel more safe. Your trust in other people also grows. How often you're locked up in your cell with your television between the four walls... You have the choice. Either you get out of your bed or you get depressed (Dutch-speaking criminally irresponsible offender, Male, 53 years).

There's academic research that states prisoners' mental and physical health deteriorates during their time of imprisonment. That is commonly known and internationally studied. So self-worth and the idea of 'I can be(come) someone, I can take responsibilities, I won't succeed anyway but I can learn'. That's essential for participation. If you participate, you take responsibility for what you say, what you do, etc. (Voluntary activity provider, Male, 74 years).

Formally organised and informal types of prisoners' involvement in prison life

Respondents talked about a wide range of formally organised initiatives through which prisoners become involved in prison life. All the initiatives described in the 'participation pyramid' part were formally organised. Despite the positive outcomes already described, negative experiences with prisoners' participation and involvement in prison life were also voiced during the focus groups. According to some steering committee members and the activity coordination team, the formally organised types of prisoners' involvement in prison life (e.g. prisoner council, administering a survey) produced important information, but were time-consuming to organise and support. Furthermore, both prison guards and activity providers indicated that sometimes prisoners abused the trust they were given. In particular, the more active participation roles assumed that a certain level of trust needed to be given to prisoners.

We also have examples of people we needed to trust to do certain things, but afterwards it seemed that they did things to damage the organisation. [...] I'll give an example. There was a prisoner who was actively involved in our team to coordinate the activities, and he also got a lot of freedom. Afterwards it turned out that his business didn't look kosher, that he abused our trust (Steering committee member, Male, 42 years).

In addition to the formal initiatives, small things happened in an informal, non-organised manner. In particular, activity providers emphasised the importance of informal types of prisoners' involvement in prison life. An activity provider mentioned:

It doesn't always have to be formalised. Informal types of active involvement of prisoners must also be recognised as they are, I think, of equal importance to the formally organised types (Activity provider, Male, 38 years).

For instance, prison guards informally asked prisoners working inside the institution to give their opinions about the daily way of working of the places in which they were employed. An activity provider had the feeling that prisoners appreciated that their opinions had been requested:

I'm thinking about someone (a prisoner) who told me that he can think along with the prison guards about how they can work in another manner, which materials need to be bought, and how to handle these materials, how to store them, etc. And he told me that he liked it that people listened to him, to his expertise. [...] That was really important for him (Activity provider, Female, 28 years).

Informal participation also took place when the workplaces were closed (i.e. a few weeks during the summer holidays and during the end of year celebrations). During this period, all kinds of competitions and performances were organised to offer prisoners daytime activities, and there was one prison guard who asked prisoners to referee during a sporting event, for example. Several Dutch-speaking prisoners and activity providers also mentioned that the extent to which prisoners are informally involved in prison life varies from professional to professional. There was only one prison guard for instance, who actively involved prisoners in the organisation or support of activities when workplaces were closed. Activity providers feared that prisoners would no longer be involved if this prison guard were to get sick.

Peer support also existed within the prison; prisoners informally notified one another about different aspects of prison life. Receiving information from fellow prisoners was particularly relevant for recent arrivals:

I think that coming to prison for the first time is really hard for those who have no cellmates. If you speak Dutch, okay, you will find your own way, but if you speak another language... At our wing where female prisoners stay, there are some women who only got to know that they have the right to clean pants after three weeks (Prisoners' representative of the prisoner council, Female, 33 years).

Processes that enhance or limit prisoners' participation and involvement in prison life

There were varying levels of participation among different groups of prisoners. In particular, recently arrived prisoners, foreign-language speaking prisoners, and criminally irresponsible offenders were less involved at the

levels of the participation pyramid at which prisoners took on a more active role. But also at lower levels many prisoners felt excluded. Both prisoners and professionals were convinced that recent arrivals, illiterate or unlettered prisoners, and non-Dutch-speaking prisoners received less information. In the words of a non-Dutch-speaking prisoner:

When we receive information, we are always informed by papers drawn up in Dutch, never in French. That's a real problem. Even if we are informed, we don't understand the information as it's in Dutch. So that's a problem for us (French-speaking prisoner, Female, 41 years).

As noted above, all prisoners experienced problems in obtaining information on arrival in prison. For many Dutch-speaking prisoners this problem diminished during their incarceration period, but this was not the case for the French-speaking prisoners.

In order to (also) reach these groups, an internal information channel through which prisoners could be informed about diverse aspects of prison life was under development. The aim was to make an introductory film for recently arrived prisoners.² Moreover, a working group (composed of professionals and a prisoner) was developing a communication plan. In the future, this would include pictograms to facilitate communication with foreign-speaking and illiterate prisoners about various aspects of prison life.

A second factor was the place that prisoners' participation and involvement in prison life had within the culture of the prison. The members of the steering committee declared that it was important to have the explicit goal of creating a culture in which the participation and involvement of prisoners would no longer be questioned. They were aware that this would be a long process, as implementing a change in culture implies changing attitudes. Criminally irresponsible offenders had the feeling that prison guards had different ideas about the extent to which prisoners could be actively involved in prison life. On the one hand, there was a group of guards who were receptive to new ideas of increased involvement among prisoners; but on the other hand there was a group that held the view that prisoners should serve their time without too many 'privileges'. Some prison guards mentioned that they were afraid that prisoners would become more involved in prison life in future years. One prison guard mentioned that he was not against increased involvement among prisoners, but he was afraid that this would be incompatible with austerity measures, as you need professionals to support these prisoners. Furthermore, some prison guards also felt that prisoners misused the trust they were given by professionals.

Conclusion and discussion

² This introductory film was completed a few months after completion of the research project, and it is now shown in the waiting room for newly arrived prisoners.

This study has explored the types of prisoners' participation and involvement in one prison in Flanders, as well as the lived experiences of prisoners and professionals involved with these initiatives, and the processes that enhance or limit prisoners' participation and involvement in prison. Qualitative data from 11 focus groups involving professionals and prisoners were used to provide an answer to the research questions. The findings suggest that prisoners' participation and involvement in prison can take various forms. Classifying the initiatives in the participation pyramid (based on the ladders of Nacro (2014) and Taylor (2014)), reveals that prisoners have more chance of becoming involved in one of the lower participation rungs (i.e. informing, consulting), but also that these levels may not be considered as invaluable as not everyone has to reach the higher levels (i.e. involving, collaborating, devoting/empowering). Although prisoners have different roles at these higher participation levels – more active participation roles (Edgar et al., 2011) – it is important to acknowledge that not all prisoners want to take an active role within prison. In Belgian prisons participation is a right and not an obligation. However, it is important to provide opportunities for participation and to break down barriers to participation for those who want to become more actively involved, as non-participation is not always a conscious choice on the part of the non-participants (Brosens, 2015).

At the same time, the findings highlight that participation was not shared among the prison population. In particular, recently arrived prisoners, foreign-language speaking prisoners, and criminally irresponsible offenders were less involved at all levels of the participation pyramid. Our research demonstrates, for example, that these groups are less informed about how the prison functions. In order to inform recently arrived prisoners, prisons can employ prisoners to inform new arrivals about the policies, procedures and realities of prison life (Boothby, 2011; Devilly et al., 2005; Perrin and Blagden, 2016). As indicated by Inderbitzin, Walraven, et al. (2016), fellow prisoners can also support each other in an informal way; they share advice and exchange information among themselves. Our results are generally in agreement with their findings. In particular, cellmates inform recently arrived prisoners about the daily running of the prison and they provide support. This might be linked with the concept of 'informal volunteering', implying that people help individuals in ways that are not coordinated by any organisation. Examples of informal volunteering include giving directions, listening to a friend's problems, and offering advice (Einolf et al., 2016). The big difference is that informal volunteering in prison appears to be based not on long relationship and friendship, but rather on the chance occurrence of prisoners sharing the same cell. Devilly et al. (2005) state that although the importance of informal contacts should be not underestimated, it is important to explore the utility of official programmes. It might, therefore, be important to promote not just formally organised types of support to fellow prisoners, but also to encourage and valorise informal initiatives.

One possibility would be to create structures for opportunity in which informal volunteering can take place. For instance, the library may not be used just as a place of learning, but also as a venue for meeting other people, reading together, etc.

Our study also demonstrates that foreign national and non-Dutch speaking prisoners have fewer participation opportunities in the prison. Consistent with earlier research (Barnoux and Wood, 2013; Bhui, 2009), language problems in particular hinder foreign national prisoners' equal participation and involvement in prison life. They frequently lack information about various aspects of prison life, and as a result they almost never reach more active levels of the participation pyramid. For instance, this population is frequently excluded from research (Yildiz and Bartlett, 2011), which is one means of consulting prisoners. Surveys can be translated (e.g. Author 2015a; Slotboom et al., 2011), or interpreters can support researchers whilst conducting interviews (Bhui, 2004) to hear the perspective of foreign national and non-Dutch speaking prisoners. Another way of representing the ideas and perspectives of these prisoners could be that certain representatives of the prisoner council speak Dutch and another language.

As prisoners are likely to come from disadvantaged groups within society (e.g. low levels of educational attainment – Lehmann, 2011; Ramakers et al., 2015; high levels of unemployment before incarceration – Zybert, 2011), prisons can be considered as places where the most vulnerable groups in the community are to be found. Many of those people are not able to make contact with social services or to engage in participation opportunities available in the community outside. When participation opportunities are offered in prison, imprisonment can act as a 'circuit-breaker'. Although correctional institutions are disempowering in nature, as they control and constrain individuals' autonomy and choices (Hannah-Moffat, 2000), Woodall et al. (2013) believe that their task can be to create more empowered individuals who have the possibility of taking control of their life following release from prison. For example, our research suggests that participation and involvement in prison improves prisoners' self-esteem and confidence, and increases their sense of responsibility. Prisoners also receive the opportunity to develop new skills that they will be able to apply after their release from prison (e.g. conflict handling, formulating ideas). However, whether or not a person participates in prison may not be considered as the full responsibility of the individual prisoner. This can be linked to the 'pains of self-government', a concept introduced by Crewe (2011). Suffering from the pains of self-government means that prisoners are allowed more autonomy than historically, while they are still controlled by prison staff. For instance, they are given more responsibility for their own rehabilitation, while power 'is all-encompassing and invasive, in that it promotes the self-regulation of all

aspects of conduct, addressing both the psyche and the body. There are few zones of autonomy, either spatial or psychological, where the reach of power can be escaped' (Crewe, 2011: page 522).

The research also revealed that the working group communication involved one prisoner. After the research was finished, other working groups also decided to include prisoners. The idea behind involving prisoners in these working groups is that the perspective of the ultimate target group (i.e. prisoners) can be taken into consideration in decision making.

Another aspect revealed by this study is that there are different perceptions regarding the place of prisoners' involvement and participation within the prison culture. Professionals responsible for organising prison activities seek to implement a culture in which involvement and participation are considered as 'normal', while some prison guards are more sceptical. Linking this to rational choice theory and assuming that people know what the consequences of their actions will be (Voss and Abraham, 2000), we might presume that prison guards' pay more attention to the costs (e.g. investing time) than to the rewards (e.g. participation benefits), while activity providers focus more on the rewards.

This study has several limitations that should be taken into consideration when reading and interpreting the results. First, since only one prison was involved in our study, it is to be recommended that the study is repeated in other prisons – both remand prisons and prisons where sentences are carried out – to gain a more complete understanding of prisoners' participation and involvement in Belgian prisons. Secondly, the data would also be enriched if more women were involved. Only five female prisoners were involved in our study, due to the limited number of female prisoners (4.5%).

Thirdly, including prisoners in the development and conduct of the whole research project would have added value in terms of the topic of our research: active involvement of prisoners in prison life. In our research, there was an imbalance of power between professionals involved in the steering committee of the research project and prisoners. Professionals involved in the steering committee made decisions about the design, planning, implementation, coordination and evaluation of the research. Prisoners were involved as participants in the focus groups; moreover, we also presented the results of the research before completion of the research report to a small group of prisoners and we jointly discussed the results. The inclusion of prisoners as members of the steering committee would increase their involvement in all the different research phases. Following completion of the research project, the steering group translated the outcomes of the study into concrete actions and two prisoners

are involved in this process. They will continue as members of the group that is charged with responsibility for following up this action plan.

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