

# BLACK HERO'S JOURNEY

*"With Black Hero's Journey, I see myself as enough."*



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*Designed and illustrated by Drew Sinclair*

*Date: November 2024*

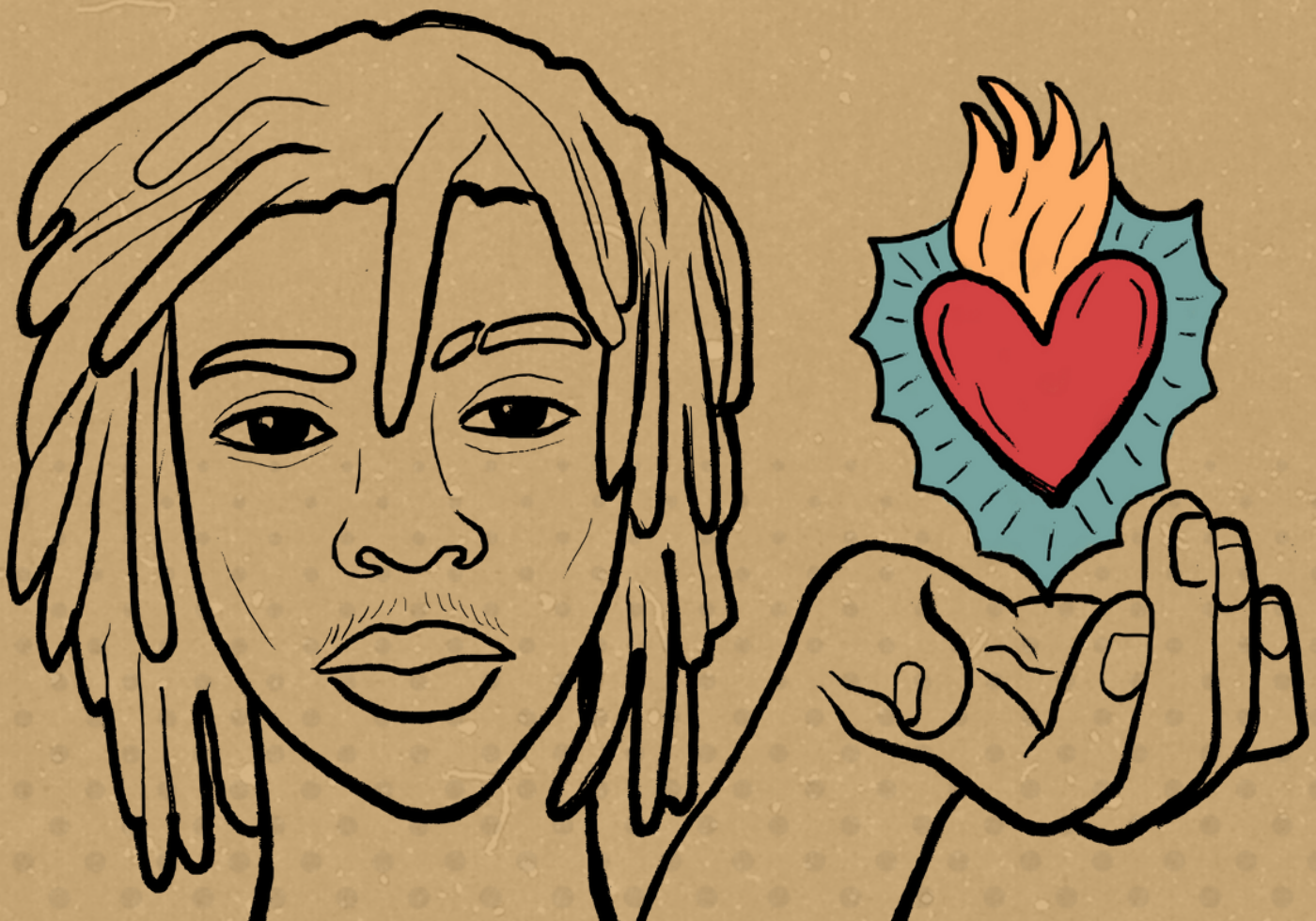
**SPARK  
INSIDE**  
COACHING IN PRISONS



# A SERVICE AUDIT OF THE BLACK HERO'S JOURNEY PILOT AT HMP ISIS:

## STORIES OF IDENTITY AFFIRMATION, RESILIENCE AND TRANSFORMATION

*"May the stories shared here spark a flame that drives us towards a future that is fairer and more equitable for everyone." Dr. Noreen Dera.*



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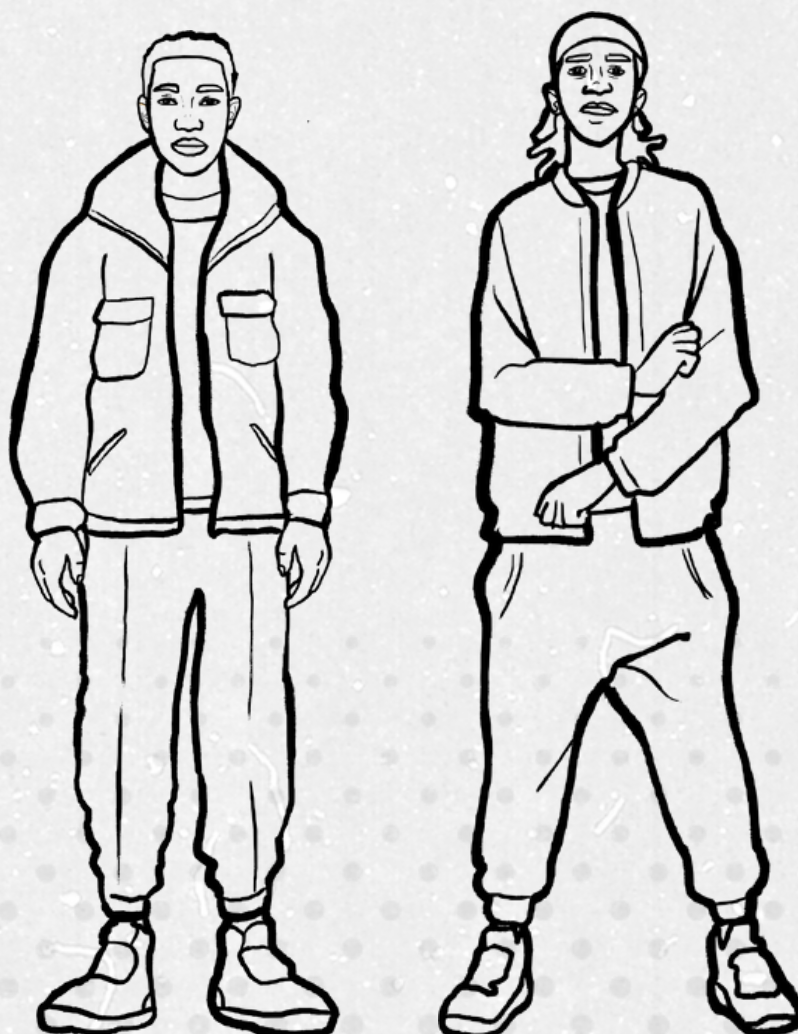
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# Executive Summary

Young adults make up 15% of the prison population, with the highest level of Black and ethnic minority over-representation in the adult prison estate. Significant evidence highlights that more needs to be done to recognise and meet the needs of young Black men and address the systematic discrimination that exists within the criminal justice system.<sup>1</sup> This report presents an audit of Spark Inside's programme, Black Hero's Journey, that has sought to respond to this need and offer a new approach to rehabilitation

Black Hero's Journey is a life coaching programme for young Black men in prison, delivered over a series of 4 workshops (2-hour sessions made up of structured, interactive activities and discussion), followed by one-to-one coaching sessions. The programme was adapted from Spark Inside's Hero's Journey™ programme and was co-designed with young Black men with lived experience and Black practitioners. The programme is delivered by professional life coaches, all of whom are Black, and provides a safe space for young Black men to engage with the topic of Black identity, and the experiences and attitudes linked to their view of themselves as a member of the Black male community.

*"Seeing a Black coach doing things made me believe I could too." (Ben)*

This audit reviews the impact of the Black Hero's Journey pilot at HMP Isis, where the programme was delivered three times during 2022-23. During the pilot, 22 young Black men, aged between 19 and 28, were involved in the programme, with 77% (17/22) attending all four sessions, 9% (2/22) attending three and 14% (3/22) attending two sessions. The 20 young men who went on to attend one-to-one coaching sessions received an average of 7.45 sessions. The audit draws on the views of 12 young men involved in the pilot programmes, three Black Hero's Journey coaches and the Spark Inside Participation and Engagement manager.

Young men describe a prison system, frequently characterised by hostility, discrimination and oppression. It is an environment that relies on them presenting different versions of themselves to fit the expectations of those in power and their peers, while constantly facing the impact of stereotyping and labelling that impose self-limiting beliefs – an experience that many have faced throughout their lives.

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<sup>1</sup> HM Chief Inspector of Prisons (December 2022) Thematic Review: The experiences of adult Black male prisoners and Black prison staff, HMIP





Their stories highlight the emotional and mental toll of navigating the system while trying to retain their sense of agency and self-worth.

*"Understanding that it's not about changing myself or how I look, but rather understanding why these perceptions exist and what I can do to help myself." (Ben)*

The audit provides a powerful narrative about the impact of Black Hero's Journey, which enabled young men to:

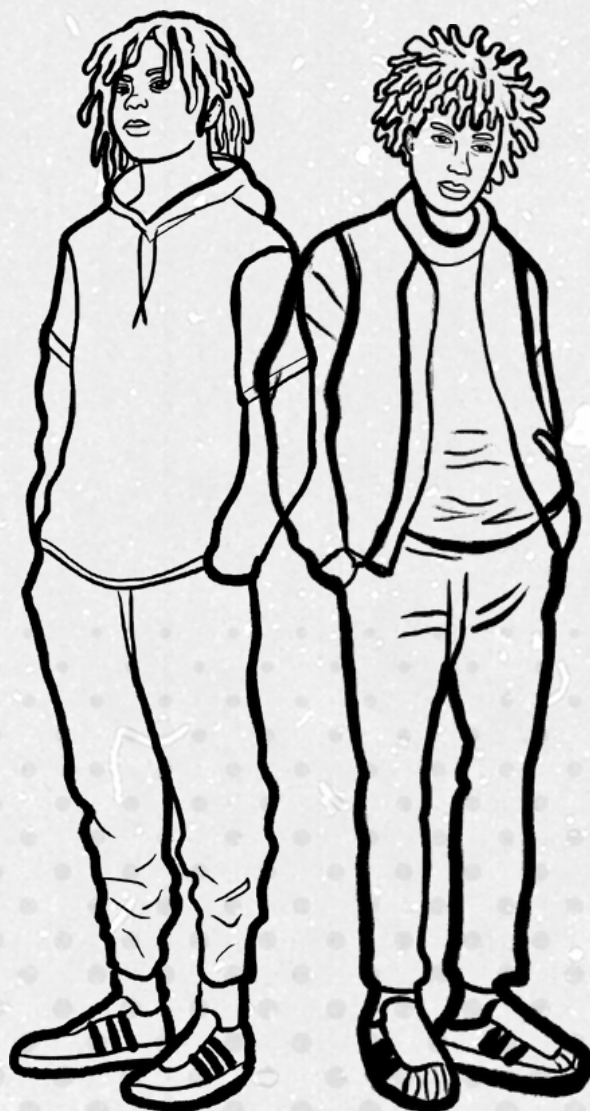
- challenge negative stereotypes, navigate their own racial and cultural identities, celebrate being Black and develop their own positive sense of self
- develop self-confidence and emotional resilience
- discover a greater sense of purpose, motivation and hope for the future
- develop improved mental and physical wellbeing
- establish trusted pro-social relationships and a sense of community.

*"I feel like I have got a calling in life, greater than what I limit myself to. Society and the system try to keep me boxed in, but I'm greater than that."*

*(Romeo)*

The audit found that the impact reached beyond the individuals involved in the programme, with young men applying their learning positively to those around them, influencing their behaviour and discussions with prison staff and peers.

*"It's mad because I apply it to everybody around me. In the yard, we discuss things that we have never talked about before." (Kenan)*





Young men attributed the success of the programme to its ability to foster genuine connection and cultivate a safe space where they were able to be vulnerable and present their authentic self. This sense of safety was achieved through the gradual creation of trusted relationships and a sense of belonging, where the young men and coaches were able to connect over shared experiences of racism, upbringing and the challenges of being young and Black in the UK. At the same time, the space allowed for differences to be respected, and individual identities honoured. Young men described an environment characterised by reciprocal learning, developed through coaches modelling appreciative listening, curiosity and compassion. Safety was also promoted by allowing the young men to have a sense of agency and autonomy within the group, which in turn contributed to the development of trust.

Both coaches and young men highlighted how it was only through the creation of this safe space that participants were able to fully engage in the transformative process.

*"I used to think I can't get a job. But after this course I think I can." (Tariq)*

This audit draws on the experiences of those involved in the Black Hero's Journey pilot to identify nine calls to action in creating rehabilitative and transformative spaces for young Black men:

- Adopt a compassionate lens
- Create and sustain safe spaces made for and run by Black people
- Foster a sense of community and brotherhood
- Promote historical and cultural awareness, challenge and dismantle harmful narratives
- Acknowledge the broader impact of programmes such as Black Hero's Journey on the wellbeing of young men
- Harness the power of hope
- Recognise the essential role of expert, professional, Black coaches
- Commit to creating safe spaces that extend beyond the prison gates to provide essential support for young men as they re-integrate into society.

## Caution: Self-care and wellbeing warning

This text may trigger strong emotional responses. Please remember to care for your wellbeing as you read. If you feel overwhelmed, pause, take a break, or seek support. It's important to engage with this content in a way that feels safe and manageable for you.





# Foreword

This report eloquently captures young Black men's narratives of the Black Hero's Journey programme in HMP Isis and Noreen should be commended for this achievement. It provides sound evidence that programmes that speak to men's experiences of the deleterious effects of racism can yield positive outcomes. The men spoke of how the BHJ programme transformed their lives, gave them hope for the future and helped them to negotiate prison life in a manner that was beneficial to them. The core conditions for empowered engagement with BHJ resonates with other work with Black men such as, for example, my work on socially oriented approaches to mental health recovery. We found that the pillars of recovery were authentic relationships, safe spaces, renegotiating identity, and achieving agency.

I endorse the recommendation that work of this nature should not only take place within the prison setting, but it should also continue after the men's release from prison. This would facilitate their reintegration into society. This report also points to the need for identity-based work with young Black men at a much earlier stage in their lives and more importantly that this should be done within intersectional and intergenerational frameworks. A real highlight from the report is the presentation of narratives of transformation and hope, which is missing from reports on Black men. The remit of this service audit was to collect feedback from the men, so the recommendations naturally are located at the individual level. However, it must be acknowledged there is still a wider need to focus on structural issues, such as the over-representation of Black men in the prison system and how their racialised needs are not taken into account. Moreover, the observation in the report about the role of Black staff in prisons is important and should be an area for future research and investigation. This report should be read by everyone who is concerned with promoting racial justice for Black men in prisons and its recommendations should be implemented widely.

- Professor Frank Keating, Professor in Social Work, Royal Holloway, University of London





# 1.Introduction

*Seeing a stranger who cares about me - not as much as my sister, but they're still caring about me, when they didn't need to - just showed me that, rah... there are good people out there. Don't lose hope. Because there was a time, I was losing hope in humanity...' (Ismail)*





Whether it's a sister like Ismail's, a friend, a cherished pet, or a treasured charm, many of us have someone or something that reminds us we are cared for, that takes us to a warm, safe and nurturing place. A place that helps us feel strong, renewed, and hopeful. This report centres on this very idea, exploring what is possible when young men are cared for, nourished, and supported in ways that make them feel strong.

In this report, we delve into the stories of identity exploration, resilience and transformation of young Black men<sup>2</sup> who partake in the Black Hero's Journey (BHJ). Despite experiencing a life marked by trauma, poverty, and social disadvantage, they find strength in being seen, valued and celebrated in BHJ. This report moves beyond the usual bleak statistics and detached analyses of the state of UK prisons for young Black men. There are many to mention but specifically, the HM Inspectorate's report<sup>3</sup> (HMP Inspectorate, 2022) is a necessary and yet sobering read, serving as an important reminder for the need to dismantle destructive systems that harm and oppress Black male prisoners and staff. Without providing a blow-by-blow account of the lived experiences of racism in prison, a pathway to improvement suggested by the participants of this seminal work was a need to provide 'spaces for conversations that could start to break down cultural barriers and improve mutual understanding' (pg. 59). This report provides an audit of what was achieved when one such space was created through, BHJ, a culturally attuned workshop.

From the stories of the Windrush generation, to acts of racial resistance through colonialism and slavery, and the rising popularity of podcasts as cultural platforms for story telling, oral histories have been a significant part of the cultural fabric and DNA of people of African and Caribbean heritage.

Black people have a long history of telling their stories, using oral methodologies as a valid and intergenerational source of knowledge generation and transmission. It is fitting that this year's Black History Month theme is 'Reclaiming Narratives,' highlighting the profound influence stories can have in shaping our past, present, and future.

The accounts in this report are shared from the perspectives of young male storytellers who are seldom heard, who offer us a glimpse into the personal journeys that define their lives.

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<sup>2</sup> Refers to individuals who identify as male and are of African descent, including mixed heritage typically between the ages of 13 and 30. For the purpose of this write up, this term will be used to collectively to refer to adult men in prison who have African and/or Caribbean heritage.

<sup>3</sup> Thematic Review from Her Majesty's Inspectorate on the experiences of Black prisoners and prison staff's experiences





It provides a racial trauma informed,<sup>4</sup> solution-focussed insight into the transformative power of providing safe and humanising spaces for young men as a potential antidote to the sting of structural and institutional racism<sup>5</sup> which can leave many depleted, dehumanised and disempowered.

The young men in this report share stories of being burdened with the weight of their past and the harsh realities of the criminal justice system. They find a sanctuary and connect with their marginalised identities through the BHJ. Here, they are given a momentary respite from the hostility of their environment, a space to self-discover and understand their worth, and find ways to navigate their lives, not in isolation but in unison with their peers and coaches. This opportunity allows them to envision new possibilities for their lives, to rewrite their stories with hope and purpose.

We acknowledge the existing policies and reports that outline the challenges and barriers within our prison system (see Lammy, 2017 review).<sup>6</sup> We do not seek to undermine these efforts, nor to sanitise the crimes that have brought these men to this point. We present a story of possibility and hope as an ethical stance to rehabilitative care. By investing in coaching and creating spaces for safe, vulnerable conversations, we offer a potentially meaningful solution and pathway out of crime and a powerful tool for rehabilitation.

As Ismail eloquently said in the opening quote, restoring faith in humanity is essential, especially for those who have been repeatedly let down by the very systems meant to protect them. This report is a testament to the potential for change when we choose to listen, care, see, and support. It is a call to action to acknowledge the lived experiences of young Black men, whose voices are too often silenced or ignored. Their stories are not just narratives of struggle but vehicles of change, shedding light on the gaps in our policies and systems. It is our collective duty to use these insights as a catalyst for transformation, recognising that their voices are the missing piece in the puzzle of systemic reform and a more equitable future.

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<sup>4</sup>A racial trauma-informed approach acknowledges the impact of systemic racism on mental health and prioritises culturally sensitive care that validates experiences and supports healing (Bryant-Davis & Ocampo, 2005).

<sup>5</sup>Institutional racism, as defined in the Macpherson Report (1999), refers to "the collective failure of an organisation to provide an appropriate and professional service to people because of their colour, culture, or ethnic origin." It can be seen or detected in processes, attitudes, and behaviour that amount to discrimination through unwitting prejudice, ignorance, thoughtlessness, and racist stereotyping, which disadvantage minority ethnic people. This form of racism is embedded in the policies, practices, and procedures of institutions, leading to systemic discrimination and unequal outcomes for minority groups.

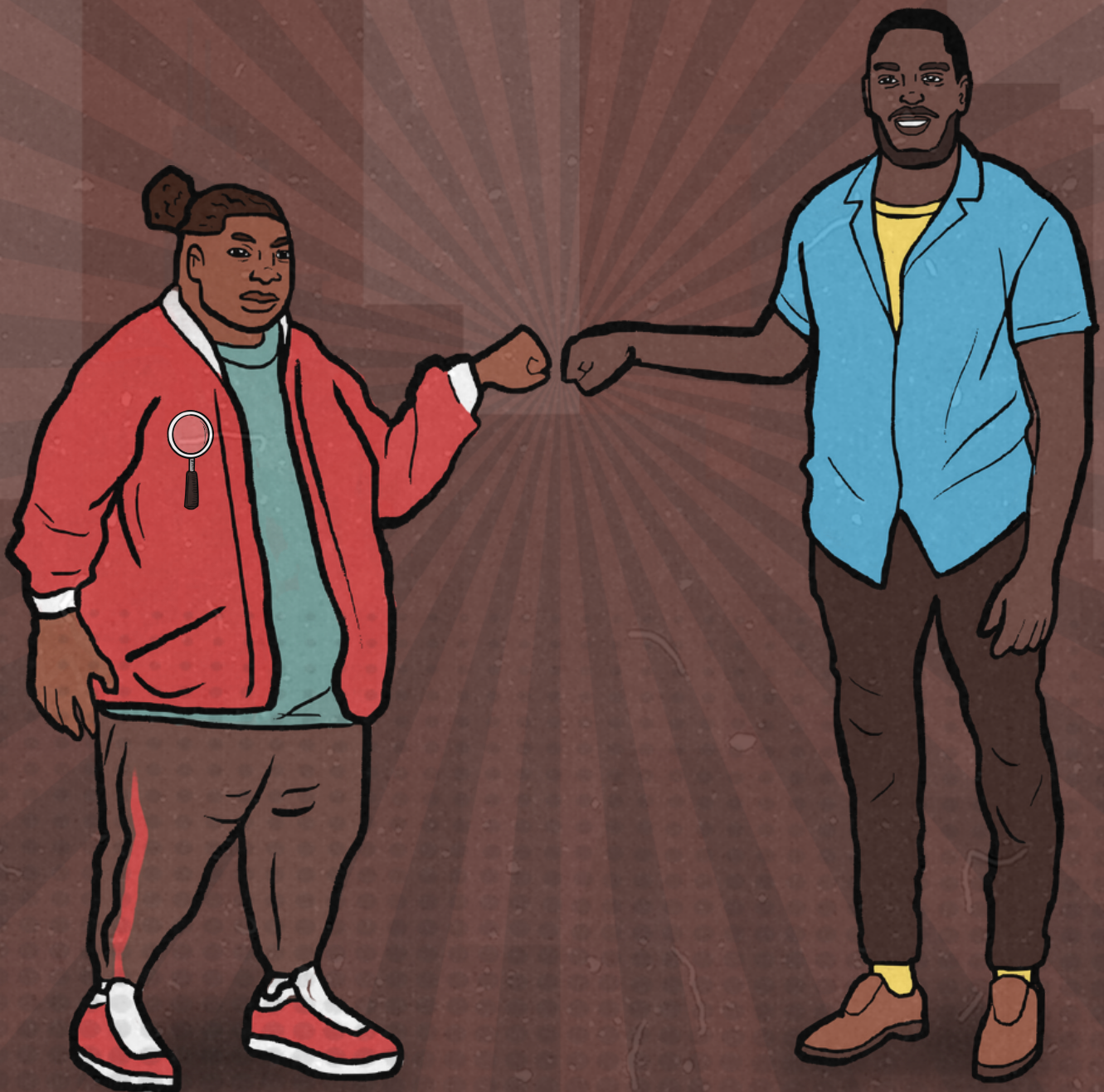
<sup>6</sup>Lammy, D., (2017) *The Lammy review: An independent review into the treatment of, and outcomes for, Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic individuals in the Criminal Justice System*. London:HM Government, 1-104





## 2. About the Black Hero's Journey

*"How did this get past the system?" he exclaimed. "Someone must have been sleeping at the desk when they put this forward!"*





## Why and how did Black Hero's Journey come to be?

*When Spark Inside rolled out the pilot of BHJ, its very existence was met with a sense of disbelief. How had something so radical ended up being offered to young Black men in HMP Isis? The journey, as is often the case, was one of many steps.*

*So here is a short story of how BHJ came to be...*

Spark Inside's signature programme Hero's Journey is based on the work of the late mythologist, Joseph Campbell. It is a series of three group workshops where participants reflect and share their own life experience to understand where they are in their life's journey and start to create a vision for where they want to get to. Following the workshops, participants often choose to continue with a programme of eight one-to-one coaching sessions with one of the two workshop facilitators.

In the first 10 years of delivering the Hero's Journey programme to young men in prison the programme was attended by 1,000 men of whom about 58% were Black or of a Black mixed heritage. From a diversity and inclusion perspective, Spark Inside were very pleased to regularly field delivery teams that included a Black coach and, over the years, some of the Black participants expressed a preference for working with Black coaches. Spark Inside know that for some Black clients, the experience of working with a mature white male coach has proved to be an important and valuable opportunity to reset their relationship with the older white male identity compared to other mature white males who have shown up in their life as teacher, police officer, and judge or prison officer. However, it made them wonder what a course led only by Black coaches working with Black or Black/mixed heritage clients might achieve. When they asked some men who had taken part in the Hero's Journey what they thought, they were very positive about the idea and encouraged Spark Inside to create a suitable programme. So, in 2018, they made a start.





They launched the project to create Black Hero's Journey by assembling an advisory board to bring together a diverse and experienced group:

- Adrian Stretch – the Head of Quality Development at HMPPS Youth Custody
- Dr Patrick Williams – an experienced researcher in Criminal Justice and young Black men
- Dr Kenny Imafidon (MBE) – a young man with lived experience of prison who also set up his own successful research social enterprise
- Remi Joseph-Salisbury – researcher specialising in racism and anti-racism in policing

The advisory board was brought together to provide expertise and guidance to the project team and academic consultant, Dr Bianca Bailey-Wilson – a social researcher in communities specialising in linguistic diversity and urban language. Advisory board members were tasked to critique the assumptions, methods and models, and to validate the development and delivery of the project based on their expertise and diverse experience of the criminal justice system.

Two tasks they achieved were to oversee the literature review and Theory of Change produced by Bianca. The literature review concluded that “The disparities in experiences for Black men in the criminal justice system have been highlighted by many (Lammy, 2017;<sup>7</sup> Uhrig, 2016;<sup>8</sup> Young Review, 2014<sup>9</sup>) and evidence indicates that systemic issues relating the life experiences of Black men in Britain in relation to issues of underachievement and exclusion from mainstream schooling (Graham et al., 2019<sup>10</sup>), arrests and imprisonment and treatment while in prison (House of Commons Justice Committee, 2018.<sup>11</sup>) This picture arguably warranted a tailor-made Hero's Journey programme for Black young men, to support them to move towards a positive attitude and motivation to change their life (Spark Inside, 2019!<sup>12</sup>)

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<sup>7</sup> Lammy, D., (2017) *The Lammy review: An independent review into the treatment of, and outcomes for, Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic individuals in the Criminal Justice System*. London.HM Government, 1-104.

<sup>8</sup> Uhrig, N. (2016) *Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic disproportionality in the Criminal Justice System in England and Wales. A Ministry of Justice Analytical Services Report*

<sup>9</sup> The Young Review. (2014) *Improving outcomes for young Black and/or Muslim men in the Criminal Justice System*.

<sup>10</sup> Graham, B., White, C., Edwards, A., Potter, S. & Street, C. (2019) *School exclusion: a literature review on the continued disproportionate exclusion of certain children*. Department for Education Report. Department for Education, UK.

<sup>11</sup> House of Commons Justice Committee. (2018) *Young adults in the criminal justice system Eighth Report of Session 2017-19*.

<sup>12</sup> *The Hero's Journey Life Coaching Programme – Impact Report Summary, Spark Inside*





However, ensuring that there is clarity on what the desired outcomes are for the programme, as well as ensuring that the coaches are equipped with the cultural competence and understanding necessary to support the Black young men, will be fundamental to its success (Plaister-Ten, 2013.<sup>13</sup>)

This original design of the new programme included adding a new session to the curriculum of the original Hero's Journey programme that explored code-switching. Code-switching involves adjusting one's style of speech, appearance, behaviour, and expression in ways that will optimise the comfort of others in exchange for acceptance, fair treatment, quality service, and opportunities. It is usually done by a member of an underrepresented group (consciously or unconsciously) to fit into the dominant culture. This adjustment was integrated into the session plan for the first pilot which was delivered in HMP Isis in March 2020. One week later, UK prisons went into shutdown due to the COVID-19 pandemic, bringing the pilot to a halt.

In December 2022, with the original project team, except the coaches, departed, the project was passed on to Spark Inside's new Head of Impact and Innovation, Tom Currie. Through interviews with the advisory board members and the three coaches involved in the original pilot Tom established a consensus that the programme "could go further and deeper." To fulfill this potential, he initiated a new design process, centering the experiences of the three young, Black male coaches involved in the original pilots, who had themselves grown up in inner-city London boroughs and were experienced criminal justice practitioners. The design team also benefitted from the expert input of Tony Weekes, a youth and conflict practitioner with extensive prison delivery experience and Cecilia Cappell, Spark Inside's Participation and Engagement Manager.

The new design sought to offer a rare space, particularly in prison, for Black men to share their experiences. The original curriculum of Hero's Journey has been retained but woven through the workshops are conversations designed to surface participants' experiences, beliefs and learnt behaviours around identity and race. These conversations often start from the coach introducing a concept, posing a question and sharing their own experience before opening the question to the whole group and facilitating the ensuing discussions.

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<sup>13</sup> Plaister-Ten, J. (2013) *Raising culturally-derived awareness and building culturally-appropriate responsibility: The development of the Cross-Cultural Kaleidoscope*. *International Journal of Evidence Based Coaching and Mentoring*, 11(2), pp. 53-69





# Black Hero's Journey Design Team



To create a safe and strong vessel for these conversations to address tricky or tender subjects, the coaches introduce, the Swahili phrase 'Sawubona' during the early stages of the first session. This greeting translates as "I see you, you see me" but the greeting, and its response: 'Yebo, sawubona' mean something more profound: "I and my ancestors see you and your ancestors. And you and your ancestors see me and my ancestors". This was used as an entry point to an exploration of what it is to be seen and to allow others to see you, setting a context for the whole programme and creating a ritualised greeting that repeats at certain points throughout the remaining session. The delivery team staff also witnessed the greeting being used by participants out on the prison wings.

The Black Hero's Journey focuses on race and racism, giving participants space to reflect on painful experiences. However, the programme also emphasises understanding the growth and journey they have been on since their early, formative years. It aims to help the men recognise how bias against their skin colour and (sub) culture - whether from individuals, institutions, or society - can be internalised. By building this awareness, the programme hopes to empower them to explore different paths and make new choices.

Another incredibly important aspect of the programme is the celebration of Black identity and culture. This starts with looking at the aspects of Black culture that the men in the room experience, value and enjoy. Or to put it more simply, what they love about being Black.





It then extends into a larger exploration of how, across the last 8,000 years of world history, cultures that arose on the African continent developed knowledge, produced technology and created culture and art that has enriched all of mankind. This information is often a real eye-opener to participants who have mainly been shown and taught a more western-centric version of history. A version that looks at the last 400 years and features Black people mainly as slaves rather than innovators, philosophers, mathematicians, astrologers and scientists.

As well as these new pieces of curriculum the Black Hero's Journey also takes some of the original Hero's Journey sessions and broadens, deepens or refocuses their scope. This includes expanding the session exploring identity, where each participant expresses how their own identity is contributed to by the qualities listed below:

- Being a Black male
- Ethnicity (where I am from)
- Family and community values (what I have learnt from them that guides my decisions)
- Personal values (what matters to me)
- Faith/Beliefs/Religion
- Reputation and status
- Relationships (loved ones)
- Hopes and dreams
- Ability or disability
- Other (Mental health, Appearance, Sexual orientation)

During the three pilot programmes we ran in HMP Isis, the order and flow of the curriculum was tweaked and re-ordered to create the four workshops. An overview of the session content, with new BHJ material shown in **bold**, is laid out in the tables below.

## Session 1

Intros / Check-in / Group agreements

**Sawubona**

Predict the future

Hero's Journey steps

Qualities mirror

## Session 2

Intros / Check-in / reflection

**Celebrating Blackness / Black Joy**

**World history, maps, melanin and worth**

**Experiences of race**

Who are you?

## Session 3

Intros / Check-in / reflection

**How I see myself / how you see me**

**Social intelligence and**

**Codeswitching** Mental health impacts

Possipping

## Session 4

Intros / Check-in / Reflection

**Internalised bias** / limiting beliefs

Qualities constellation

Standing in your quality

Crossing the threshold, committing to my future





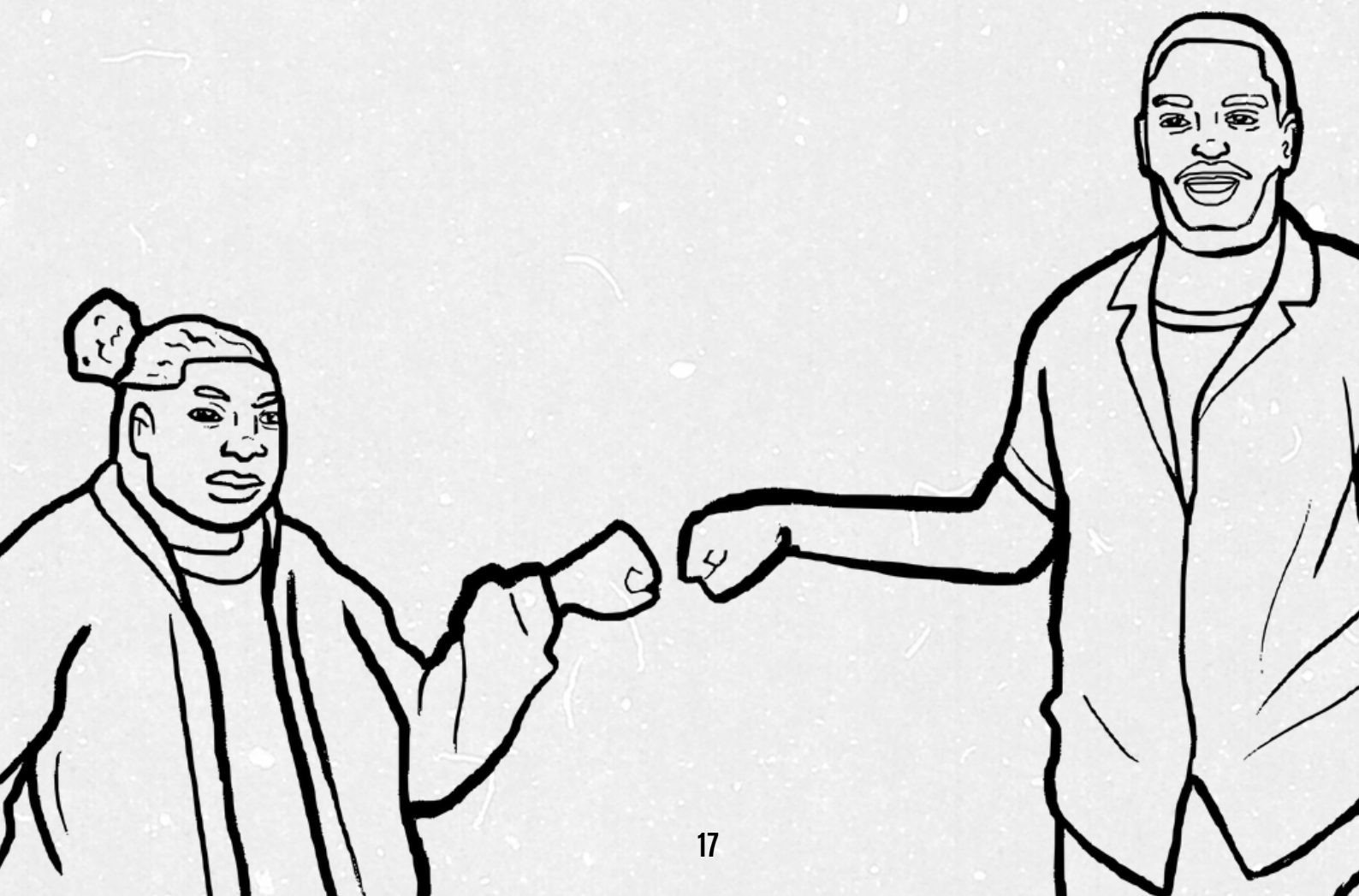
The session plan provides a framework for a series of conversations facilitated by the coaches. The body and content of those conversations are the experiences that participants share in response to the various topics. Or, as Cecilia describes her experience in the workshop:

*"BHJ offers a safe space where you can agree, you can disagree, you can share light bulb moments to think, 'Oh gosh, I hadn't thought about things in that way!'*

*So, to create positive environments where young men are able to share is an important thing... If you look historically, Black people, our histories mean that we are good orators, we are more comfortable in those spaces, and that's what I see.*

*If you can create that environment, then there's a real kind of chemistry and synergy and almost kind of magic that happens. A transformation is probably a better word than magic. You see spaces being transformed and individuals being transformed."*

This report cannot invite you into that space, but we would like to share stories from those who were there, so you can witness the journeys of these men.





# 3. Method

*"In the telling of our stories, we remake ourselves; in the retelling of our stories, we remake our communities." - Michael White*





The service audit of the BHJ pilot at HMP Isis was carried out to establish a clearer understanding of Young Black Men's experiences of the programme and its impact. Supporting this was a project steering group consisting of the interviewer/lead investigator, Spark Inside's Head of Impact and Innovation, the Porticus UK's Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning leads and a consultant with lived experience of being a young Black man in prison who engaged with the 2020 pilot of Black Hero's Journey.

This group met on a regular basis to support the progress of the investigation, including reading transcriptions of interview recordings, the initiation of thematic analysis of the data, and the development of the final report. It also provided a space for a reflective process to take place, including reflection on the internal and racialised dynamics within the group itself, ensuring that the young men's narratives were accurately represented and respectfully handled, and that the work of the lead investigator was supported and consolidated throughout the process.

In a manner that was reflective of the deeply relational nature of the coaching process that Spark Inside facilitates inside prisons, the lead researcher recorded appreciative, open-ended interviews in-person with seven young men, between the ages of 19-28, completing sentences at HMP Isis who attended BHJ between 2022-2023. The attendance at workshops was good for a prison programme, with 77% (17/22) attending all four sessions, 9% (2/22) attending three and 14% (3/22)<sup>14</sup> attending two sessions. A focus group with five young men (the cohort for the third pilot) was conducted by the lived experience consultant.

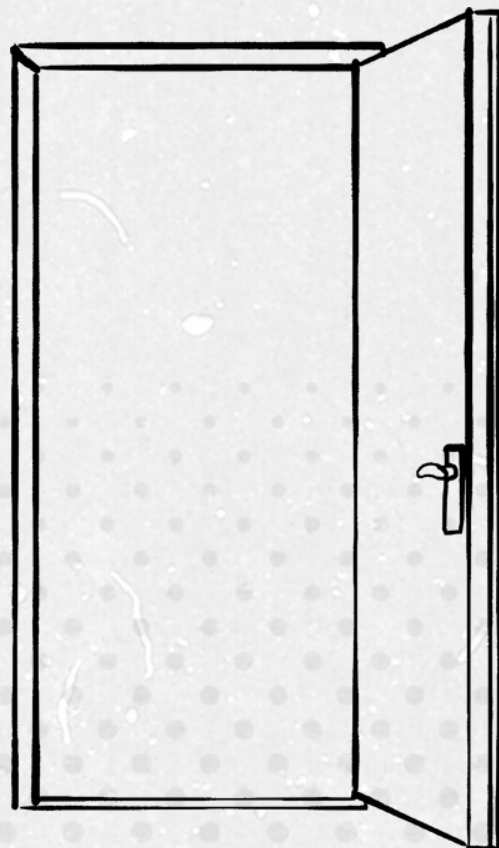
Rob Fitzpatrick facilitated telephone 'debrief' sessions with the lead investigator following the one-to-one interviews which enabled an initial processing of the experience of gaining entrance to the prison, negotiating the regime, making contact with each of the young men and reflecting on the issues that they raised. Online interviews were conducted with three Black Hero's Journey coaches and the Spark Inside Participation and Engagement Manager (see appendix B for coach biographies), to provide further context.





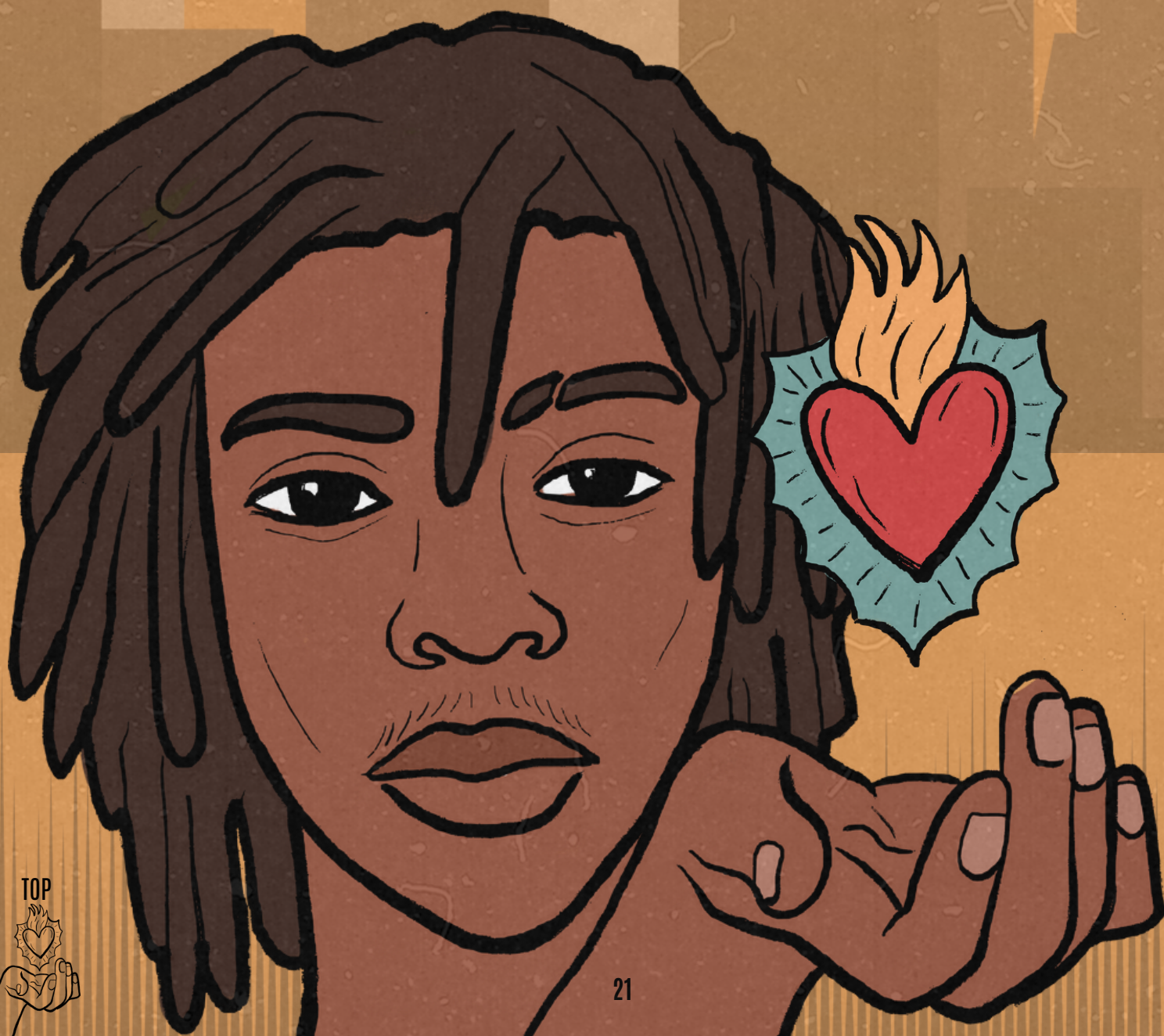
Analysis of data was informed by the principles of reflexive thematic analysis, which focuses on identifying and refining key themes within the data (Braun & Clarke, 2021). The process began with a thorough review of each participant's full interview transcript to gain a solid understanding of the content. Following this, each participant's initial coded transcript was reviewed to better understand the main ideas and themes that had been identified. Specific quotes supporting these ideas were then extracted from each transcript and added to a master codebook in Microsoft Excel, which compiled all the important themes and codes. The next step involved organising these codes into relevant themes, creating an accessible document that highlighted the main ideas along with supporting quotes from multiple participants. To ensure a meaningful analysis, similar codes and themes were combined to avoid repetition and to highlight both common and differing perspectives. Colour coding was used to make it easier to identify which themes were most prominent or frequently mentioned by participants. Finally, the coach's transcripts were reviewed to extract statements that aligned with the themes and ideas shared by the participants, enriching the overall analysis.

The findings from the analysis are represented via a thematic map. This describes a series of key themes and subthemes derived from the young men's accounts of life in prison and their experience of engaging with the Black Hero's Journey and coaching.

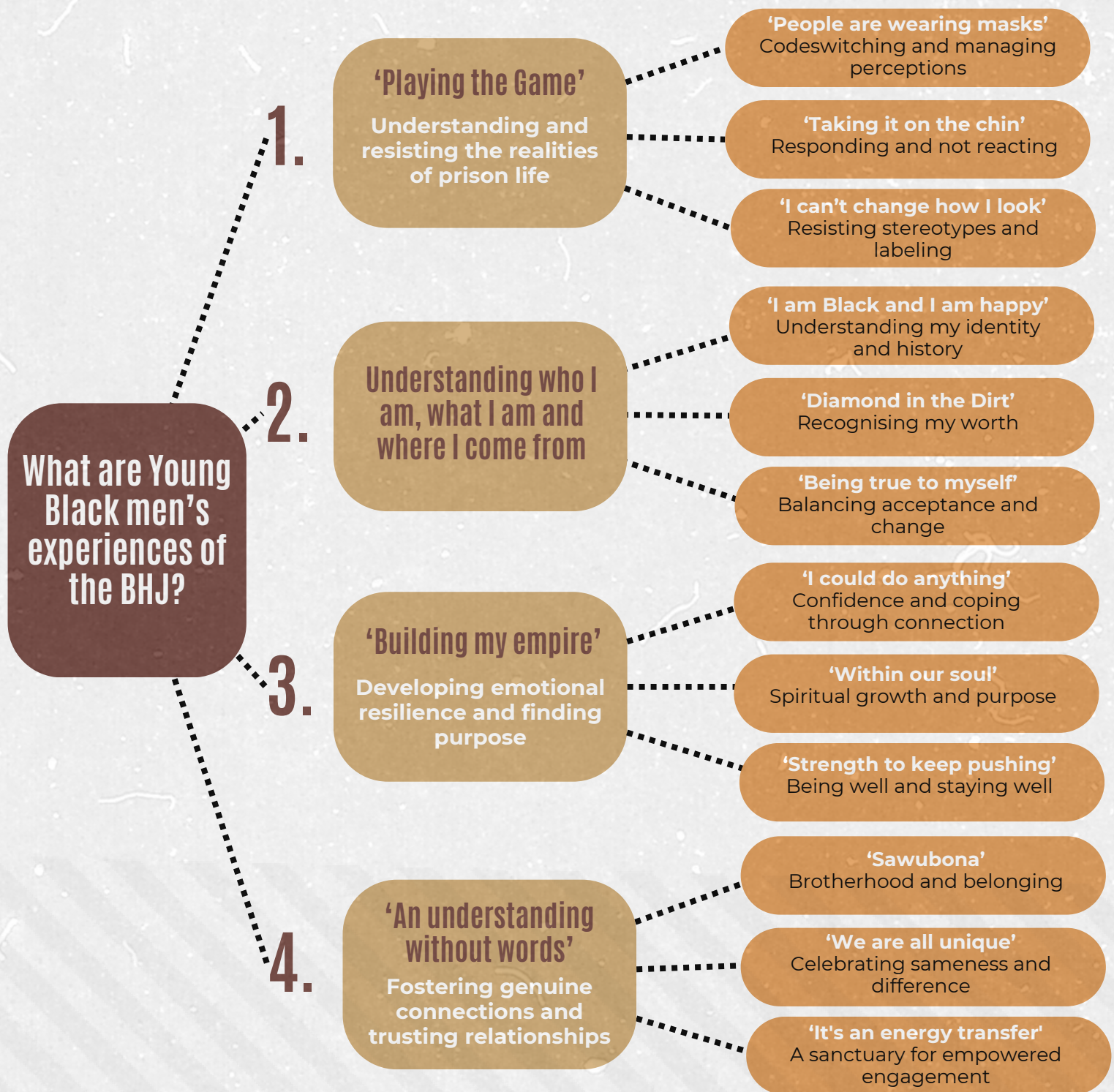




# 4. Thematic map







Each theme and subtheme is designed to capture and summarise the essential aspects of the men's stories, giving readers a structured way to understand the different facets of their experiences with quotes as a narrative window into the young men's thought processes and personal reflections.



# 5. The Storytellers





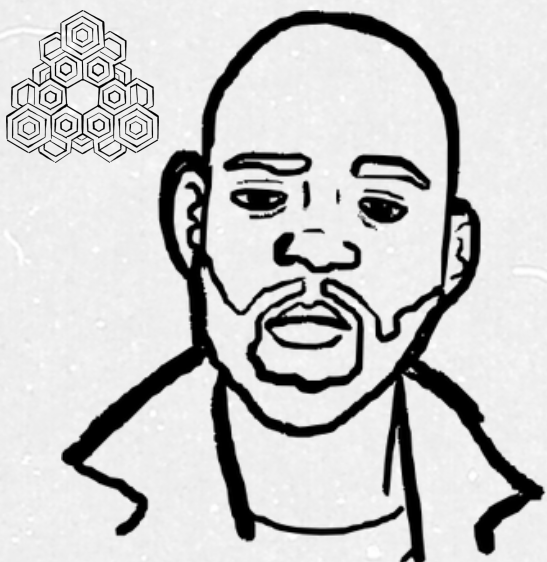
Here, we summarise the 'big stories' to provide context to the quotes cited later in the report. This personalised approach ensures that the participants' individual stories are preserved and considered within the larger group narrative. Collectively, the participants have been grouped as the 'storytellers'<sup>15</sup> to emphasise their role as subjects of the main story. The readers are therefore seen as 'appreciative listeners' to recognise your active engagement and willingness to form an understanding of the experiences shared.

## Romeo

Romeo's story is one of resilience and transformation. Despite growing up in a loving and secure environment, the weight of poverty and disadvantage led to him being caught in a cycle of violence and incarceration. Through learning about his history, exploring his identity and understanding his upbringing, Romeo began to see himself not as a 'criminal', but as a person with potential and worth.



The Kaleidoscope,



## Christian

Christian's journey is marked by his struggle with identity. As a young man, he grappled with societal expectations and the pressures of fitting into a mould that never seemed to fit. He grappled with colourism<sup>16</sup> within his own family, often questioning where he belonged in the kaleidoscope of a mixed family. BHJ workshops and coaching sessions helped him to embrace his uniqueness, find strength in his heritage and recognise his value.

<sup>15</sup> See Appendix A for monitoring data

<sup>16</sup> Colourism, often described as the 'cousin' of racism, is the discriminatory preference for lighter skin within communities of colour, where social privilege is afforded based on proximity to whiteness. Hunter, M. (2007). *The Persistent Problem of Colorism: Skin Tone, Status, and Inequality*. *Sociology Compass*, 1(1), 237-254.



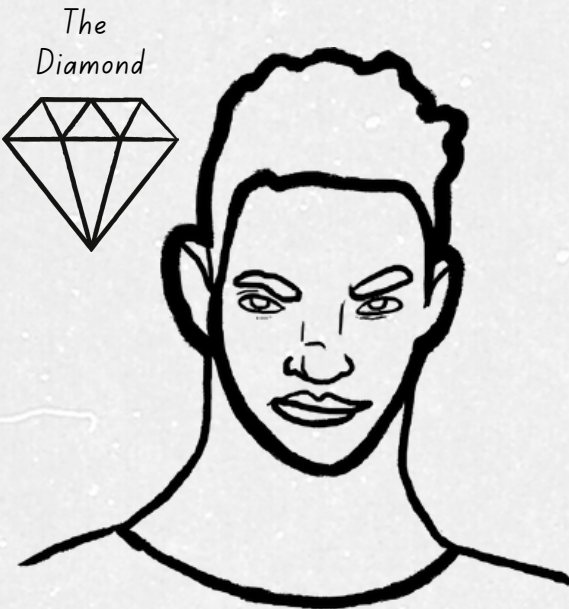


## Kenan

Kenan's narrative is one of introspection and growth. He entered the programme with a deep sense of anger and frustration at his early life experiences and unjust treatment from the officers within prison. He recognised that he was trapped in a cycle of re-offending which he owed to lacking constructive guidance and emotional maturity. Through the BHJ he learned to channel his emotions constructively and discovered his newfound determination to turn his mistakes into purposeful living.



The  
Acorn



The  
Diamond

## Ismail

Ismail's life has been a series of challenges and setbacks, from forced migration to childhood abandonment, neglect to taking up adult responsibilities early due to a life of poverty and socio-economic disadvantage. Yet, his participation in BHJ allowed him to reconnect with pride in his origins and heritage. This connection became a source of strength and resilience and affirmed his identity as 'the diamond in the dirt'.

## Asante

Asante's story is one of leadership and empowerment. From lacking positive role models in his early life and the hardships he faced navigating life as a young Black man, he emerged as a natural leader within the group, using his voice to inspire others and advocate for change. The programme gave him a platform to amplify his message of hope and unity.



The  
Voice



*The Student*



## Ben

Ben's story revolves around the theme of recognising the limitations he placed on himself which stemmed from his difficult relationship with the education system. After making choices that led him into a life of crime, he sought a way to make amends and focus on a hopeful future. BHJ provided him with the tools to do just that, helping him to construct meaningful and restorative narratives about his identity and his sense of self.

## Frank

Frank's journey is characterised by his quest for knowledge. Always curious and eager to learn, he found in BHJ a wealth of information about his history and culture. This knowledge fuelled his desire to continue on a path of self-learning and a motivated future.



## The focus group

Comprising five young men, Alex, Kwame, Jordan, Tariq and Olu each shared their stories of feeling held, heard, and supported through the workshops. By recounting their collective experiences of fractured upbringings, navigating spirituality, overcoming psychological barriers, and reconstructing their identities, they discovered a source of camaraderie and strength in each other.

Growing up in unstable environments often left these young men feeling disempowered and disconnected. The BHJ provided a safe haven where they could openly express their struggles and triumphs. Spirituality, in the form of 'brotherhood' and seeing each other offered them solace and purpose amidst their challenges. In the focus group, they affirmed the competence of the coaches, highlighting their pivotal role in inspiring self-reflection and a desire for change.





# 6. The collective stories:

The Voices and Experiences of Black and Mixed Heritage Men on the Black Hero's Journey



## Note to readers:

All quotes and extracts are taken directly from the interview transcripts with the participants and coaches. In some cases, text has been truncated for clarity. Omissions or conjoined text are indicated by the symbol [...]

TOP





# 6.1 'Playing the game':

## Understanding and resisting the realities of prison life

### **'Taking it on the chin': Responding, not reacting**

Learning to respond rather than react is a crucial strategy for navigating the prison system. By managing their reactions, the young men learn to avoid further punitive measures and maintain a sense of agency.

### **'Wearing a Mask': Codeswitching and managing perceptions**

The emotional labour of constantly switching codes and wearing masks takes an emotional toll. To survive, the young men have to present a different version of themselves, one that fits the expectations of those in power (and their peers) while concealing their true identities.

### **'I can't change how I look': Resisting stereotypes and labelling**

The young men share their ongoing struggle against the stereotypes and labels imposed on them. They work to dismantle these limiting beliefs and assert their individuality beyond the labels they are given.

## 'Taking it on the chin': Responding, not reacting

"Prison is depressing," exclaims Christian, highlighting a 'harsh reality' of imprisonment. This theme sets the context of BHJ, focusing on environments hostile to the well-being and survival of the young men. They paint a grim picture of prison life, sharing stories of relentless hostility and perceived unjust treatment on a daily basis. They reveal strategies to cope: codeswitching, responding rather than reacting to maintain control, and resisting stereotypes and labelling.

Tariq describes his experience in prison as *"trying to break me"*, but reflects that *"these courses help my mental health."* This reflects the perceived systematic and deliberate process of degrading and dispiriting prisoners, a process that is described as debilitating for one's mental and spiritual health. Learning to respond and not react is an essential self-regulation skill used to maintain a sense of personal control in the dysregulated prison environment:





*"I go through a lot, and it's easy for me to reoffend. I act without thinking, so learning to think before acting is something I didn't realise could help. It's those little things explained in a way that makes sense to us" (Kenan)*

The young men learn about weighing the costs and benefits of their actions, choosing strategies that help them stay in control and avoid resorting to the expression of personal aggression, which could lead to further loss of freedom.

Tariq describes the importance of this approach: "You learn to **take it on the chin** to get what you want. Right now, I'm not letting anything get between me and my D-cat. It's about what's more worth it: pride or freedom?" This perspective allows Tariq to navigate his relationships with wing staff tactically, understanding that the open expression of emotion can be manipulated to maintain power over people in prison. By choosing to respond with strategy and foresight, he reduces the risk of being targeted by punitive measures, preserving his path to the next stage of his sentence.

Ismail reflects on his internal struggle with the prison regime: "Fighting the process hurts you more. Embracing it makes you a better person." In this context, it appears that 'embracing' is not about 'surrendering' to oppression but rising above it. It involves recognising the system's traps and refusing to let them dictate one's emotional and mental state, as expressed by Olu "I don't give the govs that time of day to try and draw me out, you know what I'm saying? The confidence I have, I'll just laugh it off bro." This form of self-preservation represents an act of reclaiming power from a position of inner strength (and sometimes humour), enabling the men to focus on their long-term goals and personal growth despite the dehumanising conditions.

Speaking in the focus group, participants likened their survival strategies to 'playing the game.' Tariq explains, "You gotta **play the game**. Raising your voice makes you aggressive. Cameras go on, you get punished. Let it slide sometimes."

Tariq's quote captures a fundamental survival strategy within the restrictive and often oppressive environment of prison. He outlines the need for strategic composure and self-control, pointing out that overt displays of anger or dissent are likely to be met with severe repercussions. By "playing the game," he refers to the emotional labour involved in navigating the prison's unwritten rules and power dynamics carefully to avoid negative attention from authorities. Tariq suggests that sometimes the wisest course of action is to remain calm and not react, essentially to "let it slide," as a means of self-preservation.





## 'People wear masks': Codeswitching and managing perceptions

Another survival strategy is codeswitching. Asante notes, *"You have to switch up how you talk, act, posture. Be mindful of your persona."* This shields the young men from being negatively labelled and helps them sustain a sense of control during their interactions with prison staff. Codeswitching also helps them navigate the prison wing subcultures with their peers, where superficiality dominates.

Kenan expresses the internal conflict of trying to apply the positive lessons and skills learned in BHJ while facing a prison wing culture focused on trivialities: *"Learning new skills, then going back to the wing where they talk about Love Island. The programme makes you think differently."* This statement highlights the tension between the enriching, growth-oriented environment of BHJ and the often superficial, distracting conversations and concerns prevalent among men not on the programme.

For Kenan, the contrast underscores a challenge many participants face: maintaining the motivation for self-improvement in an environment that often rewards social conformity and discourages introspection. The disparity between the programme's transformative experiences and the wing's everyday reality can create a sense of isolation, as those who pursue personal development may feel alienated from peers more interested in day-to-day entertainment.

Jordan articulates the exhaustion of constantly having to switch personas in prison: "A lot of **people wear masks**. Sometimes, wearing a mask is long, so I'm just by myself." His words highlight the pressure to adopt different identities to fit into prison dynamics and avoid conflict. "Wearing a mask" represents the need for self-preservation through strategic behaviour but risks eroding genuine identity over time. Many people in prison conceal vulnerability, adopting tougher exteriors to avoid being perceived as weak, which can blur the lines between their true selves and the personas created for survival. However, there are external markers of their identity that are hypervisible and targets of negative stereotyping and profiling.





## 'I can't change how I look': Resisting stereotypes and labelling

Ben discusses his struggle: *"This environment is bad for trying to stay positive. Just because you're big, they look at you differently. They might say I'm a bully or involved in bad stuff."* His physicality makes him hyper visible, risking negative labelling. Christian discusses the fortitude needed to resist stereotypes and the role of BHJ sessions in highlighting the impact of stereotypes: *"So, learning that session was like, you gotta fight off these negative things people throw at you like, or you're a thief or you're gang or you're gang member."*

Sam (BHJ coach) discusses the role of the workshops in helping the young men resist negative stereotypes: *"I think it allows them to see themselves in a different way and to see others like them differently. [...] within the prison environment, there is a lot of facade and pretence and acting that has to be kept up all day, every day, seven days a week."* He speaks about the space created within BHJ, where layers can be stripped off, allowing for authentic connections, that enable an unapologetic co-existence with their peers. It is through this authentic, ownership of the space that some participants learn to resist the challenges of prison life, particularly the depleting effects of stereotyping and racism.

Ben reflected on his experiences: ***"I can't change how I look*** or how I'm perceived. That's the first thing people see, and they make judgments based on that. It's something you can't change. For me, that's very important because, for a long time, I've been told otherwise. Understanding that it's not about changing myself or how I look, but rather understanding why these perceptions exist and what I can do to help myself."

Ben speaks about the role of BHJ in empowering participants to resist stereotypes, understand the history and context of the power dynamics at play, and recognise that there is nothing inherently wrong with them. Instead of trying to change who they are, they are encouraged to focus on what **is** within their control, in ways that enhance their sense of agency.

This understanding shifts his focus from trying to change his appearance or the inherent biases of others, to understanding the roots of these perceptions and strategising ways to navigate them, a skill he attributed to BHJ.





# Summary:

## **'Playing the game': Understanding and resisting the realities of prison life**

Life in prison is tough: Prison is a harsh environment that can severely impact mental and spiritual health. The oppressive atmosphere, combined with hostility from prison staff and other prisoners, often leads to poor wellbeing. The young men must find inner resilience to cope with these challenges and maintain a sense of self amid constant stress and isolation.

### **Survival requires strategy**

The young men must adopt strategies to avoid being targeted and stereotyped. They carefully navigate interactions and resist peer pressure to conform to prison culture. This involves assessing situations quickly to determine when to assert themselves and when to stay inconspicuous, helping them maintain control over their lives.

### **Coping with codeswitching**

Codeswitching involves changing behaviour and appearance to fit different situations in prison, which helps them avoid conflict. However, this constant shifting can lead to a loss of identity, as they feel pressured to conform and may struggle with being true to themselves.

### **BHJ's role**

BHJ provides a safe space for young Black men in prison to express themselves and challenge stereotypes. It fosters community and belonging, empowering participants to reclaim their identities and resist the dehumanising aspects of prison life by offering support and validation.



## 6.2 ‘Understanding who I am, what I am and where I come from’

### **‘I am Black and I am happy’: Re-storying what it means to be Black**

The young men in the workshops navigated their racial and cultural identities, making sense of who they are within the context of their heritage. This journey allowed them to re-story the positive aspects of being Black challenging the negative stereotypes and labels imposed upon them.

### **‘Diamond in the dirt’: Overcoming negative narratives**

Through BHJ, participants began to recognise their self-worth, one described it as discovering he was a 'diamond in the dirt.' They worked to overcome the negative self and societal narratives that had been ingrained in them through childhood and negative experiences with various institutions ending in the criminal justice system.

### **‘Being true to myself’: Balancing acceptance and change**

Acceptance of their past and present circumstances was the first step towards change. The young men learned that change is a gradual process that requires accountability and responsibility. By holding on to hope, they were able to envision a positive future and engage fully with the transformative opportunities offered by the workshops.

### **‘I am Black and I am happy’: Re-storying what it means to be Black**

Christian summarised the transformative experience of BHJ: *“It was just that understanding of who I am, what I am, and where I actually came from.”* This theme reflects a deep process of self-discovery, where young men articulate and share layers of their identities and confront limiting beliefs. Through the workshops, they explore their racial identity, challenge negative self-narratives, and journey towards self-acceptance.

Coach Sam emphasised that BHJ is a celebration of culture, delving into ethnicity and community, and understanding both positive and negative influences on identity.





This exploration begins with embracing their Black identity, which often involves confronting painful experiences of racism,<sup>17</sup> colourism, and prejudice. Many participants recount how these experiences led to internalised racism<sup>18</sup>, reinforced by societal messages that marginalise and devalue Blackness.

Ismail reflects on how 'success' is often equated with 'whiteness',<sup>19</sup> saying, *"Normal people who've had a rough start in life and achieved things people said were for white people. Especially being Somali, it's harder. Our communities can't do certain things without being looked down on."* Ismail's quote captures the tension between striving for success in a world that often excludes or undervalues people based on race and background, while also confronting the added layer of prejudice that makes this pursuit even more difficult for Somali communities.

Christian recalls the racism and colourism he faced growing up: *"I was the darkest sibling. I got name-called at school and by family."* These intersecting layers of discrimination deeply influence his self-perception. For many, BHJ provides a first opportunity to explore their identities and the rich history that accompanies them. Christian describes moving from a place of shame to pride: ***"I'm Black and I'm happy."** Know what I'm saying? I love my skin colour [...] it is what it is type of thing because (if) you don't like it, that's, that's shame. When you, you are racist or you are whatever, innit. I don't care [...] My skin costs more than you.'*

Participants learn to value their skin colour and recognise their worth beyond negative labels. Ben explains, *"Everything from your skin colour is a part of you. Understanding it helps you understand more about yourself."* The workshops offer insights into historical contexts and connects them with new knowledge, enhancing their self-worth. Tariq shares how learning about his history changed his perspective: *"[The coach] told us about our worth, about our melanin, our skin, how society made our world smaller."*

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<sup>17</sup> Racism refers to prejudice, discrimination, or antagonism directed against individuals or groups based on their race or ethnicity. It is rooted in the false belief that some races are inherently superior or inferior to others. Racism can manifest in various forms, including individual actions, social structures, and cultural norms that perpetuate racial inequalities and stereotypes.

<sup>18</sup> Internalised racism refers to the internalisation of racial stereotypes, beliefs and biases by individuals of the marginalised racial group, often leading to feelings of inferiority and self-hate. Pyke, K. D. (2010).

<sup>19</sup> 'Whiteness' is not merely a racial descriptor but a system of power that establishes and maintains racial hierarchies, privileging those identified as white while marginalising non-white people. It operates as a social construct that normalises white experiences as the standard, reinforcing social, economic, and political dominance (Frankenberg, 1993).





Michael (BHJ Coach) highlights how the workshops spark moments of discovery and increased self-awareness: *"The Black Hero's journey awakens people to things they didn't know they knew."* The role of Black coaches is crucial in this discovery process. They serve as relatable role models, reinforcing messages and history that resonate with the participants.

Tariq expresses, *"Michael emphasises things we didn't know. Even in jail, we could relate. I felt understood."* Ben adds, *"Seeing a Black coach doing things made me believe I could too"*, reflecting the powerful impact of representation and role models in shaping self-belief and aspirations for young Black men. Jeffrey (BHJ coach) offered an important caveat that the success of Black coaches is not simply about racial identification, but also about the coaches' social and cultural intelligence, as it pertains to intersectionality<sup>20</sup>, social positioning and relatability:

*"It's more than being a Black man, it's more cultural than it is racial. Because if you had a Black male facilitator who doesn't understand the inner city culture, it wouldn't have the impact it's having. So not only do you need Black men, they need to understand the culture"*

The theme of intersectionality is nuanced and complex. It is also experienced and articulated by Kenan in relation to navigating the complexities of 'Blackness' and how it shows up in relation to power. He offers two interesting perspectives: while he recognises the pride, power and relatability of having a Black coach over white educator' *"[...] obviously I'll talk to a white guy normally but I won't open up because we're not the same colour, I can't open up certain things with you"*, he also names the struggle of celebrating his 'Blackness' due to the disconnect he feels with Black prison staff. He articulates this conflict, *"It's kind of hard to do it in jail. Like you can't go through the young Black man thing. You got Black staff acting like we're not the same. So that kind of affects me kind of, it affects me a bit. In the class we can talk about these things and be real about these things. But, go back to the wing, same Black guy meant to [have an] understanding of [being] Black. So, you don't have an understanding and you being mad with us."*

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<sup>19</sup> 'Intersectionality', as defined by Crenshaw (1981), refers to the way various forms of social identities, such as race, gender, and class, overlap and intersect, creating unique experiences of privilege or discrimination that cannot be understood by examining each identity separately.





This sense of alienation, particularly from Black staff who he feels should empathise with his situation, profoundly impacts his self-view. Although the group sessions foster discussions that affirm his racial identity, his experiences with the staff creates an internal conflict. He finds himself navigating the invisible complexities of power dynamics.

In the HMIP (2022) report on Black staff and Black prisoners experiences, a key finding was that Black staff may often adapt their behaviour to fit into the prevailing prison staff culture, fearing they may be viewed with suspicion or accused of collusion if they supported Black prisoners. Consequently, Black staff, regardless of seniority, often limit their positive interactions with Black prisoners to avoid such perceptions.

From Kenan's individual lens, this tension between group identity affirmation and the broader prison environment contributes to a stifling of his self-expression and self-belief, as he admits, *"...it kind of makes me give up on myself as in as a Black person, I mean dead serious."* Kenan's statement illustrates how experiences of discrimination from those sharing his racial identity can intensify feelings of betrayal and isolation. For him, this experience goes beyond disappointment; it affects his sense of self-worth and belonging as a Black person, potentially undermining his identity and capacity to cope.

## **'Diamond in the dirt': Overcoming negative narratives**

In BHJ, participants confront self-limiting<sup>21</sup> beliefs formed by trauma and societal influences. Ben reflects on his self-talk: *"I used to think I can't get a job. But after the course, I think I can."* Tariq reflected on the role of society in (re) constructing his sense of self, and the programme's role in providing knowledge to dismantle self-limiting narratives:

*"I would tell someone to do it is cause it's more knowledge and it teaches you actually about worth, about your worth, your actual worth. Not this worth that society's giving you, but your actual worth that you're not taught about. The one that you're not taught."*

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<sup>21</sup> Self-limiting beliefs may be understood to represent negative thoughts that restrict individuals from reaching their potential, often convincing them of their own inadequacy (Burns, 1980).





The knowledge gained through the course also helped Ismail to realise that he didn't need white validation to succeed: *"I used to think I needed a white friends to get rich, but I can achieve it alone."* For Kenan, he learnt that he could imagine a future beyond being *"a drug dealer and a roadman, that's all I know, ain't it"*.

Sam (BHJ coach) explained the constructs that underlie these self-limitations, *"It's the social construct of what a young Black man should be. It's the, I guess it's the, the lanes that they are given to manoeuvring themselves. So not just what they people think they should be, but equally what they think they are"* The workshops help the young men recognise these constructs and challenge negative self-talk, fostering a shift in how they see themselves.

After completing the course, Ismail describes feeling like a **"diamond in the dirt"** while Romeo expressed *"You feel like you got so much potential, that don't ever limit yourself"* both affirming their self-worth. The young men acknowledge that, despite the challenges and hardships they face, they hold immense value - though hidden - it remains intact.

With his statement *"with Black Hero's Journey, I see myself as enough."* Ismail reflects a deep shift in self-perception. The programme helped him affirm his inherent worth, allowing him to see beyond the negative labels and stereotypes that once shaped his identity. This newfound self-acceptance marks a turning point in how he envisions hope for his future and his potential.

## **'Being true to myself': Balancing acceptance and change**

Holding on to hope as a survival stance involves balancing acceptance and change. The young men learn that transformation requires acknowledging their past and current reality while envisioning a better future. Kenan articulates this balance:

*"I have to go step by step. Start from the beginning. That's what I mean by change. You gotta start from the beginning. Like, where did it all start? Why did you start doing crime? Cool! I understand that I'm in jail. What can I fix about myself before I go home? That's what I meant by being real. What can I fix about myself before I make these bigger steps of where I want to be?"*





The self-reflective process begins with self-acceptance, recognising past mistakes, and taking responsibility. This acceptance lays the foundation for meaningful change. Tariq emphasises the importance of commitment to change and the effort required to sustain it:

*"I'd tell someone if they come on this journey make sure you're putting your all in, put a hundred per cent in, don't come in here with negative energy. Even if you don't wanna do it, step in at least one session, see how it feels. Make sure you put your all in innit. If you don't put your all in there's no point. If you ain't ready to change, don't come."*

Kenan acknowledges the challenge of sustaining change within the prison environment: *"I went kind of halfway knowing that I'm halfway through the change because knowing I'm in jail and, **being true to myself**, I'm not gonna make a full change because I'm still in jail."* This highlights the reality of striving for change while still confined within a restrictive system. Moreover, change is not always something that can be measured or instantly seen. The young men describe it as an internal journey: *"[It's] Mental. So, like, you wouldn't really see a big change, you know what I'm saying?"* It's a shift in mindset that manifests differently for each person. As Kenan put it, *"There's different types of changes. Like, we wanted to legitimately change and be better people for our kids, for our family, friends, and others."* While the workshops instil a sense of hope that fuels resilience and perseverance, the young men's experiences invite reflection and offer important feedback on how hope and 'change' can be nurtured (and sustained) within prison, especially for those with long sentences remaining.

Asante reflects on his idea of holding on to hope: *"What that journey gave was hope, knowing that, yeah, you will fall down, you will have stumbles, you will fail, but you have to keep on going and just know you can't be scared of the unknown. That's what I really learned."* Hope is the ingredient that sustains progress, enabling them to imagine a better life beyond prison.

Cecilia (Participation and Engagement manager) underscores the heart behind the workshop's success:

*"We believe that change is possible, that the things you aspire to are possible."*





Hope provides the vision; change turns it into reality. Together, the facilitators empower the young men to transform their lives and work towards the futures they desire, demonstrating the workshops' ability to foster belief and realisation of a better future.

## Summary:

### **'Understanding who I am, what I am and where I come from'**

Reconstructing racial identity: BHJ helps young men explore their racial identity, confronting racism and colourism. Participants reflect on their experiences and learn to value their skin and heritage, fostering self-acceptance.

### **Learning about history**

The BHJ workshops educate participants on the rich history and heritage of Blackness, enhancing self-worth and fostering pride. The young men reflect on the value of learning about African history and highlight this as a transformative experience.

### **Challenging limiting narratives**

Participants confront negative self-talk and societal messages that undermine their self-worth. They learn to recognise their intrinsic value realising they can succeed independently of societal stereotypes and biases.

### **Balancing acceptance and change**

Participants confront negative self-talk and societal messages that undermine their self-worth. They learn to recognise their intrinsic value realising they can succeed independently of societal stereotypes and biases.





## 6.3 ‘Building my empire’: Developing emotional resilience and finding purpose

### **‘I could do anything’: Confidence and coping through connection**

The young men describe the process of building confidence and emotional resilience as a co-constructed experience; a space where they experience mutual recognition, validation and affirmation. These are essential building blocks to help them cope with the challenges of life in prison.

### **‘Within our soul’: Finding purpose and spiritual growth**

Through conversations and shared experiences, participants discover a greater sense of purpose, not just for themselves but for their families and communities. They envision a better future and feel motivated to live more meaningful lives.

### **‘Strength to push on’: Being well and staying well**

The programme supports the men in developing better coping strategies for mental and emotional challenges. They experience improvements in their overall well-being, from managing stress and mental health to better physical care and hygiene.

### **‘I could do anything’: Confidence and coping through connection**

Asked about coping when facing constant violations and emotional setbacks, Tariq describes his process of building resilience in prison and the affirmations that help him stay strong: *“It’s like learning to take certain things on the chin, help me to continue growing like I said before, not keep, not that, not to take my eye off the target. Just keep going. Live and prosper.”*

The third theme outlines the gains from engaging in the BHJ programme and how it equips the young men to handle the harsh realities of prison life. They describe the programme as a foundational support system that allows them to develop emotional resilience, discover untapped and hidden characteristics and connect with their wider purpose. This growth is facilitated through conversations and dialogue with other participants.





It is described as a process of mutual appreciation and knowledge exchange, constructed in relation with one another, explained here by Asante, referring to feedback from his peers during an exercise he engaged in [...] *"They always said that I'm smart and my future's bright and I'm wise, especially for my age when they were talking about it. So that's something that'll always stick because it felt good hearing it from them."*

When Asante reflects on being told he is smart, wise, and has a bright future, it underscores the positive wellbeing impact of receiving validation and support from his peers. Olu described this empowering process, *"When I come out here, [I] feel powerful, confident."* The mutual recognition helps the young men see their own (as well as each others) potential and value, which is crucial for building resilience and emotional coping within a context that is frequently experienced as dispiriting and undermining of their sense of worth. It is from this foundational place that the process of building can take place. Ismail, described discovering his hidden talents, and the role BHJ played in boosting his sense of confidence to engage in a public speaking opportunity within prison:

*"I don't think I would've done the radio thing if it wasn't for the Black Hero's Journey. If it wasn't for Black Hero's Journey it wouldn't have been what I did, cos it's sort of like, before Black Hero's Journey. Lemme give you an example. I was sort of building my empire and Black Hero's Journey was one brick... I think without that brick I wouldn't have been able to put down the next brick, do you get it?"*

Ismail likens the BHJ to an essential building block for his empire. This metaphor illustrates how the programme helps him feel strengthened and supported, providing tools for navigating both prison life and the world beyond. It is this support and holding that helps them to imagine possibilities filled with confidence about the future as similarly attested by Kenan:

*"I could do anything and I could be good at it. (Mm-hmm.) So that kind of gave me an idea like, rah, like you dunno what you're good at until you try it. If you can do anything in this world (Mm-hmm) until you try it, you dunno what you're good at."*





There is a psychological shift from a place of doubt and low self-perception to a position of 'can do' and motivation to push beyond the threshold. This newfound confidence appears to stem from the realisation that their abilities are not fixed but can be expanded through exploration and effort.

## **'Within our Soul': Finding purpose and spiritual growth**

The workshops not only resonated with the men's lived experiences but also fostered a sense of purpose and spiritual growth. Participants found that dialogue within BHJ helped them connect with their personal aspirations and the possibility of sharing this knowledge with peers and family members outside of prison, helping to maintain their connection and contribute positively to those on the outside. As Tariq shared, *"I chat to my sister and tell her about the lesson, and she's taking things I've said. That makes me happy."* Ben described using techniques learned from the coaches to engage his brother in reflective dialogue: *"The coaches make me think, and if I do that with my little brother, hopefully it'll work."*

This exchange of knowledge became a key outcome of their engagement, with participants applying their learning to positively impact those around them. Kenan noted how the workshops encouraged 'real' discussions with others: *"It's mad because I can apply it to everybody around me. In the yard, we discuss things that have never been talked about before."* Ismail likened this knowledge sharing process to 'preaching' to his peers: *"When I'm chatting to the mandem and they talk about selling drugs, I give them the same talk. Like, 'bro, you're trapping your own mind.' Every time I speak to the mandem I'm preaching."*

Ismail's commitment to sharing these insights highlights his newly discovered purpose, where he aligns his actions with deeper values and beliefs, finding meaning in guiding others away from paths that limit their potential.

Many participants spoke about the role of the workshops in instilling a sense of purpose and duty, seeing beyond the present and connecting to a higher purpose. Romeo articulated this:

*"I feel like I've realised I've got a calling in life, greater than what I limit myself to. Society and the system try to keep me boxed in, but I'm greater than that"*





Despite being physically confined, Romeo's mindset reflects liberation, with his mind free to explore a purpose that calls him forward.

The BHJ also enhanced spiritual connections, both in religious terms and through self-discovery. Tariq explained how the workshops helped him find a deeper sense of identity: *"It gave us a real identity, clarifying us even more, like searching within to see who we really are, to like, to tap into deeper, like, like within our soul."* This spiritual growth was not by accident but through deep self-exploration. For others, engaging in the workshops helped them reconnect with religious practices, using prayer as a coping tool. Christian noted, *"I'm praying more—when I wake up, eat, put on clothes. It's become a crucial part of my routine."*

Connecting with their spiritual self-acts as a protective mechanism for survival in an environment many such as Frank describe as *"depressing."* Tariq reflected, *"The religion thing is a good card because without it, I'd break. I've got to make sure I pray, stay strong, mind strong."* This spiritual connection helps them preserve resilience and cope with the adversities of prison life.

## **'Strength to keep pushing': Being well and staying well**

Beyond spiritual growth, others noted improvements in personal hygiene and physical self-care, highlighting the link between mental well-being and physical health. Christian observed, *"It's showing me more about being healthy. Even now, I'm making sure my mind's healthy."* Kenan expressed similar benefits, saying, *"I stopped vaping and started working out every day. It's part of the workshops—it's about being healthy."* While BHJ workshops were not explicitly designed to address mental health issues, many participants found them to be therapeutic. Christian, for example, shared how being truly seen and understood helped alleviate his struggles: *"I go through mental health problems as well. I've got PTSD, anxiety, and pressure. But when I went on this course, it helped me understand and made me push away that side of my life."*

This experience highlights how the sessions, although not intended to be formal therapy, create an environment of support and understanding that can lead to improvements in mental well-being. The power of the workshops lies in fostering a sense of connection and alliance, offering young men a space where they feel valued and heard. Jeffrey (BHJ coach) explains how the space for organic conversations is engendered, and how psychological safety is created:





*"Although the group setting is not a counselling session, we create a safe space that's for a lot of them and men, and I'm sure all of them, the first time they've had a space like that in prison, which has been organic. We haven't said those with mental health, come to this mental health group and let's talk about it. Those interventions are there and only certain types of people will go to that or be referred. This has nothing to do with that, but it comes up organically and the men love it because it's a natural space."*

This quote highlights the unique, organic nature of a BHJ group setting. Unlike formal mental health interventions in prison, this space naturally fosters open conversations without the stigma of being a 'mental health group.' The young men value the environment because it feels inclusive and allows sensitive issues like mental health to arise naturally:

*"I became aware then that it wasn't just coaching, sometimes it was mental health, sometimes it was brother, uncle, dad scenario to young person. It's whatever they need, but it's something that they needed and they may never have had or not had. And they're getting it from our coaching sessions" (Michael, BHJ Coach)*

This supportive environment can have a significant positive impact, providing therapeutic benefits that enhance their mental health and resilience as expressed by Tariq *"it has really helped my mental health."* However, the young men acknowledge the continuous effort required to maintain the strategies learned in the workshops, recognising the challenge posed by the disparity between the prison environment and the supportive space created within BHJ. Their main critique of the BHJ programme is its duration, which many participants felt was too short. They emphasised the importance of continued engagement to reinforce the learning. As Christian noted, *"I would change it to maybe longer courses, even if it's just a week or two extra, just to really take everything in, if that makes sense."*

Despite these challenges, the young men stress the importance of persistence and rising above their circumstances. As Asante reflected, *"Even though it's tough, we have to keep going. The tools and support from the BHJ programme give us the **strength to keep pushing** forward, even when the odds are against us."*





# Summary:

## **Building my empire: developing emotional resilience and finding purpose**

### **Confidence and coping**

The young men describe how the BHJ workshops help them build resilience and stay focused on their goals, despite prison's harsh realities. They gain emotional strength and increased confidence through mutual support and validation from peers.

### **Recognising self-worth**

The workshops are likened to a crucial building block, boosting confidence to take on new opportunities and cross the threshold. Kenan realises the value of trying new things to discover hidden talents. The young men connect with their value, and realise these are parts of them that have always existed; but are reignited through empowerment from coaches and peers.

### **Being well and staying well**

The young men report benefits such as improved hygiene and mental and physical health. Some also link mental well-being to better self-care and improved spiritual health. Despite challenges of sustaining the gains, they stress the importance of persistence and using their learning from the BHJ to keep pushing forward.



# 6.4 ‘An understanding without words’:

## Fostering genuine connections and cultivating safety

### **Sawubona: Brotherhood and belonging**

The young men describe the formation of a brotherhood, experiencing a sense of connectivity that transcends their identities as prisoners. This helps them feel a familiar connection with each other, fostering a sense of belonging and relatability in their shared experiences of racism, upbringing, and the challenges of being young Black men raised in the UK.

### **‘We are all unique’: Celebrating sameness and respecting difference**

Through various exercises, the young men felt recognised for their values and characteristics, which helped them connect with their sense of worth and understand others. They celebrated their similarities and differences, appreciating unique life stories within shared lived experiences. This allowed them to move away from a singular idea of what it means to be Black, valuing diverse perspectives.

### **‘It’s an energy transfer’: A sanctuary for empowered engagement**

The group provided a sanctuary for genuine conversations, described as an energy transfer between coaches and participants. The relationship fostered trust, mutual learning and growth. The workshops promoted agency, autonomy, and ownership. They had a choice over the content, pace, and discussions, contrasting this with other prison interventions. The sense of trust in the coaches, the process, and appreciating each other were highlighted as the key ingredients and social glue holding the space together.

### **‘Sawubona’: Brotherhood and belonging**

BHJ workshops foster a powerful sense of connection and understanding that transcends words. Sam (BHJ Coach) highlights this when discussing his experience of facilitating the workshops: *“There’s **an understanding without words** that you are welcome here. You are heard, and you are seen.”*





This captures the essence of our fourth theme, where shared experiences and unspoken recognition form the foundation for transformative conversations.

This sense of understanding is akin to the experience of acknowledging another Black person with a nod on the street—an unspoken “I see you,” embodying ‘Sawubona’, the Zulu greeting which emphasises recognising each other's worth and dignity.

Within BHJ workshops, the young men describe forming a brotherhood that transcends their identities as prisoners, providing a sense of belonging. They connect over shared experiences of racism, upbringing, and the challenges of being young Black men in the UK:

*“We were all in the same environment, going through similar situations. Even if we grew up in different areas, the root of why we did what we did is the same. We have a lot in common.”(Ben)*

Romeo similarly captured this feeling of affirmation: *“It just felt like my people in a room, with friends and Cecilia there. It felt right.”* This familial identification with other group members breaks down barriers and fosters emotional safety.

The terms ‘brother,’ ‘brotherhood,’ and ‘family’ frequently appear in participants’ descriptions of their connections. Romeo further explains, *“It was like a brotherhood automatically. I felt accepted among my people.”* Tariq echoes this sentiment, saying, *“When I got to the session with Sam and Jeffrey, it felt like two Black brothers teaching us brothers. It was powerful.”* These bonds create a platform for authentic engagement with coaches, as Olu describes: *“It’s not like speaking to an officer or educator. It feels like speaking to family. I can express my feelings more.”* Olu’s reflection highlights the sense of belonging participants experience within BHJ workshops.

Unlike interactions with authority figures, the workshops offer a comfortable atmosphere where young men can open up and be vulnerable. The absence of judgment or formal pressures allows them to be themselves without fear of repercussions.





On one hand, Christian also highlights that feeling comfortable is not a default position, it is a process that is cultivated over time: *"the first session, I wasn't as comfortable if I'm being honest, [...] I wasn't comfortable at the beginning. I became comfortable at the end."*

This 'familial' identification is particularly powerful for young Black men, who often face suspicion and paranoia due to postcode affiliations and 'gang'<sup>22</sup> culture as explained by Jeffrey (BHJ coach):

*"the other thing about the young people we've work with specifically in the inner-city context, a lot of them are in gangs. If they're not in 'gangs', they're affiliated or associated. And the culture, the 'gang' culture is so strong that they may not be in a gang, but it's like if you were looking at symptoms, they have all the symptoms of 'gang' stuff and 'gang' behaviour."*

Against this backdrop, Michael (BHJ coach) highlights the transformative power of breaking down superficial affiliations and cultivating 'familial' bonds:

*"In a Black Hero's Journey, there is a brotherly love. They realise the people sitting next to them are just like them, not their opposition. Bonds and relationships are founded in the workshop."*

The use of the term "love" within a prison context is especially notable, as emotional expression is often stigmatised and associated with vulnerability. Referring to it within the context of the workshop represents a radical and powerful shift in how connection and care are framed in an environment not typically associated with such emotions.

This brotherly love extends beyond the group sessions, as Ismail explains, using 'Sawubona' to recognise the shared journey with others, even beyond prison walls: *"Looking back at my certificate, I smile. It's not just about the certificate but the lifelong friends I made along the way. Outside the walls, it'll be Sawubona."* Seeing each other, and seeing themselves is also about recognising the strength that arises from diversity of thought and experiences within the group.

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<sup>22</sup> The term 'gang' is used here with caution with recognition that it is a 'transcendental signifier' (Alexander, 2008) and a racialised construction which has been used to legitimise intrusive and harmful policing practices.





## **'We are all unique': Celebrating sameness and respecting difference**

The theme 'Celebrating Sameness and Respecting Difference' reflects how the young men find strength in shared experiences while honouring individual identities. By acknowledging common struggles, they lift the burden of isolation, fostering a sense of safety and validation. Ben notes, *"We go through the same situations. Even in different areas, it's like we have a lot in common throughout our lives."* Romeo adds, *"We've all got different cultures, different backgrounds and that. [...] although we're all unique, there's so much similarity."*

This shared understanding creates a supportive circle where participants feel understood and can express themselves freely. Ismail and Tariq express the comfort of knowing they're not alone on this journey: *"It's made me feel content and happy."* Hearing others share similar experiences encourages Ben to open up: *"When I hear others sharing similar experiences, it makes me more comfortable to talk about my own."* At the same time, the young men learn that being Black is not a monolithic experience. They respect diverse cultures and unique stories within their community, embracing individuality while recognising a shared heritage.

Christian highlights this: *"We understand each other's cultural differences, whether from Jamaica, Nigeria, Congo, or Ghana."* This respect for diversity within the group encourages openness to learning from others, regardless of age or background, as Asante reflects on gaining wisdom from older participants:

*"because in the same way, you want to know how somebody else may look at the situation. You can look at it completely different to how somebody older with much more wisdom, much more experience in life will look at the situation even... I'm learning from people older than me"*

Here, Asante appreciates that there are intersections to differences, reflecting not only on racial difference but also age, lived experiences and maturity as important facilitators of gaining wisdom from others. This openness to learn from others, regardless of age or background, reflects a recognition that differences within the group—whether in age, experience, or outlook—are valuable.





By embracing these differences, the group fosters an environment of mutual respect and growth, where individuals can broaden their perspectives and deepen their understanding of both themselves and each other. This respect for diverse perspectives within the group sets the stage for genuine connections, breaking away from the limiting stereotypes on what 'Blackness' or 'maleness' look like. This is a particular strength of a programme such as BHJ in a context where young black men are often homogenised, erasing the differences between and within African, Caribbean and Black British experiences and positions, and omitting any distinction between new migrant and long established communities. Appreciation of diversity creates a foundation of mutual respect that paves the way for a more open, honest dialogue and opportunity to explore further what makes them 'unique'.

### **'It's an energy transfer': A sanctuary for empowered engagement**

The group is experienced as a safe space to feel and to develop genuine connections, described by Michael (BHJ coach) as an energy transfer between coaches and participants that evokes strong, positive feelings: *"I know that it's like an energy transfer. If I feel lit and I feel excited, empowered, they're gonna pick it up as well."* This reciprocal relationship based on mutual value allows both parties to learn from one another. Christian felt valued by the coaches, saying, *"Hearing that from someone already is like, you're gonna learn from me, and I'm gonna learn from you. We're helping each other."*

This reciprocal learning is reparative and restorative, especially for those who have been navigating a fractured sense of self due to their early life experiences. Being seen and valued by coaches is a powerful vehicle for real conversations, where coaches personally model the inherent value and wisdom the young men hold. Coach Sam emphasises the power of reciprocity: *"Every one of them really educated me. It just makes me a better person being in their presence."*

The coaches play a significant role in empowering and humanising the young men, creating a stark contrast to their daily reality in prison. Ismail recognises this impact: *"Seeing a stranger who cares about me... showed me there are good people out there. Don't lose hope."* The space between coaches and participants is marked by genuine curiosity, empathic listening, compassion, and a desire to connect beyond the superficial.





Frank acknowledges the coaches' engagement style: *"It's all due to their style and characteristics. They knew how to talk to us and engage with us."* Asante adds, *"You can tell he was listening. When I'm talking to him, I can tell he's really taking me in."* Jeffrey (BHJ coach) explained the core conditions that make this alliance possible, *"I listen more than I speak. Being a coach has made me more empathetic, more understanding, and non-judgmental."* He described a culturally competent model of engagement that recognises the value of appreciative listening as a foundation of change and transformation.

This environment promotes agency, autonomy, and ownership, contrasting with other prison interventions that Kenan described to be imposed and impersonalised to his goals and rehabilitation needs: *"They stick us in courses we don't want to do, without considering what we need to progress. They force us to do English and Maths, and if we refuse, we get in trouble. I'm in jail, I've done my crime, but forcing us to do things we don't want isn't helping."*

In contrast, Jordan highlights the importance of a permission-seeking approach and promotion of agency that is promoted in BHJ: *"They always ask if you want to park something. It gives you a chance to get things off your chest."* This sense of agency and trust creates emotional safety, a key ingredient for cultivating vulnerability and engagement. Trust is essential for creating a supportive environment where individuals feel empowered to face their struggles with confidence. Kenan expresses this: *"Building that foundation of trust gives me hope. I could lean on them for support."* Trust is a pillar through which strong relational bonds can grow, fostering vulnerability and facilitating change.

Sam (BHJ coach) emphasises trust as a building block for self-discovery: *"When you can trust yourself, it gives you a solid foundation. Once you have that, you can extend it and start to build and plan."* From a psychological perspective, establishing trust is essential for fostering emotional safety and enabling genuine engagement in the change process (Watkins et al., 2010.)





## Summary:

### **'An Understanding without words': Fostering genuine connections and cultivating safety**

#### **You are welcome here**

Participants and coaches share a deep, non-verbal connection that transcends words, fostering a sense of mutual recognition and belonging. This creates an atmosphere where participants feel welcomed, seen, and heard before they go on to articulate their experiences with words.

#### **Formation of Brotherhood**

The workshops nurture a sense of brotherhood among participants, allowing them to connect over shared experiences of racism, upbringing, and life challenges. This brotherly bond provides emotional safety, enabling participants to express their feelings and engage authentically.

#### **Building trusting and safe relationships**

The workshops create a sanctuary where participants can be vulnerable and open, knowing they are in a space of acceptance and understanding. Trust, authenticity, confidentiality and agency promote relational safety. This is crucial for personal growth as it allows participants to connect authentically and engage fully in the transformative process.



# 7. Core conditions created by Black Hero's Journey





The core conditions that empower engagement with the BHJ appear to be: trust, agency, confidentiality, and authenticity.

- Trust forms the foundation, allowing individuals to feel secure in sharing their experiences without fear of judgment.
- Agency empowers participants to take ownership of their journey, fostering a sense of control and responsibility over their actions and decisions.
- Confidentiality ensures a safe space where personal disclosures are respected and protected, further reinforcing the trust within the group.
- Authenticity encourages participants (and coaches) to remove their masks, creating a space where meaningful connections can be created.

These elements collectively create an environment where participants feel seen, supported, valued and capable of transformation.

## AUTHENTICITY

*Like it wasn't a thing where they were just saying things for the sake of saying it or they're being assessed to just say things*  
(Christian)

## TRUST

*He got to know me before we even got to the group. I felt a relationship with him where there's like a trust*  
(Kehan)

## WHAT MAKES THE BHJ A SAFE SPACE?

## AGENCY / CHOICE

*The way they ask maybe one or two questions to begin with. Ask if there's anything on our mind we need to talk about. Is there anything to park. They'll just get us to start talking.* (Frank)

## CONFIDENTIALITY

*A safe space. I didn't feel like I was sat with a teacher in education or like I was talking to someone who's going to write a report, you know? I felt in a safe space and I could talk about anything... not incriminating myself by that.* (Tariq)





# 8. From Stories to Transformation:

A call to action





The experiences of these young men serve as a compelling call to action for those in positions of influence. Their lived experiences, rich with insight and authenticity, offer invaluable guidance for creating rehabilitative spaces that are meaningful and resonant. BHJ workshops demonstrate the potential for culturally attuned engagement. It is our collective duty to listen, learn, and act upon these narratives, ensuring future initiatives are rooted in the authentic needs of those they aim to serve. Through the power of stories, the BHJ provides a blueprint for fostering environments that support young men, paving the way for a hopeful future, full of aspiration and a stronger sense of identity and purpose.

## Adopt a Compassionate Lens

We must see these young men through a lens of compassion, humanising their realities instead of reducing them to circumstances. Recognising them as people first before the labels they attract, as BHJ does, fosters dignity and self-worth often stripped away before they enter the justice system. Frameworks and interventional approaches that are premised on telling stories help to build compassion and shorten the empathy gap that exist in systems that can be experienced as traumatising.

## Create and Sustain Safe and Dedicated Spaces

Spaces made for and run by Black people, like the BHJ, honour their identities and provide a sanctuary for exploring heritage. These environments offer belonging and safety, crucial for growth and healing. Encouraging relational risk-taking within these spaces can lead to deeper connections and a stronger sense of community.

## Foster a Sense of Brotherhood and Community

The brotherhood and belonging experienced by participants transcend prison boundaries, normalising their reality and providing support. Advocating for approaches that prioritise these connections offers a lifeline for navigating incarceration and reintegration. Evidently from this report, spaces that foster a sense of community, connection, and belonging can be reparative for young men who come from backgrounds where the concept of community is often fractured and fragmented, offering them the opportunity to rebuild trust, heal, and rediscover their sense of identity and purpose within a safe and supportive environment.





## Promote Historical and Cultural Awareness

Rediscovering history and heritage were liberating for the young men. Workshops should incorporate elements that educate about cultural backgrounds, instilling pride and identity. This knowledge empowers them to construct a positive narrative about Blackness that is rich and affirming. There is a thirst for this knowledge within this cohort of men, whose educational experiences may have been bereft of positive constructions of Black identity. Instilling such messages within the wider prison curriculum and distance learning courses beyond calendar events such as 'Black History Month' ensure that the conversation is kept alive.

## Challenge and Dismantle Harmful Narratives

Internalised narratives of criminality and worthlessness need to be confronted. Spaces where young men can be vulnerable and open are essential for challenging stereotypes. By sharing stories and embracing differences, they break free from homogenising constructs of Blackness that society often imposes and can create their preferred version of life that celebrates and recognises their uniqueness.

## Acknowledge the Broader Impact on Wellbeing

Improved wellbeing, as reported by participants, is a testament to the workshops' impact. Better sleep, reduced anxiety, and increased self-confidence should be recognised as significant outcomes. These improvements underscore the importance of holistic approaches addressing mental, emotional, and physical health within and beyond the prison system. These outcomes need to be captured clearly with the BHJ to help with future commissioning, and to capture the importance of 'non-traditional' methods of addressing and responding to the mental health needs of young Black men.

## Harness the Power of Hope

Workshops like BHJ ignite hope, a foundation for seeing themselves beyond mistakes and labels. This hope is crucial for researchers and liberators working within oppressive systems. It is the generative power to create transformative change, fostering a rediscovery of one's essence and worth.

## Recognise the Essential Role of Black Coaches

The relationship between coaches, specifically technically gifted and culturally attuned Black coaches and participants is the cornerstone of BHJ's success. Characterised by trust and mutuality, these relationships create an environment of unconditional positive regard. Coaches facilitate change, guiding participants through their journey and holding onto hope when it seems elusive.





Their presence creates a unique bond that fosters trust and growth. Ensuring coaches are protected and supported will sustain the workshops' impact. As coaches are also on their own journey, wellbeing support and reflective spaces are crucial for sustaining the emotional tax that comes with this work.

## Commit to Long-term Support

Spaces like BHJ must extend beyond prison gates. This is lifelong work, and short-term interventions need re-examining, particularly the ethical nature of providing short interventions for those serving long sentences. The supportive environment cultivated within these workshops should continue as individuals reintegrate into society, ensuring progress is not lost but built upon. It is important to carefully consider the timing of participants' engagement, especially for those serving longer sentences. Offering enriching programmes like BHJ must be weighed against the ethical challenges of implementing and maintaining the learning within the prison environment.





# 9. Final Reflections:

A Shared Journey of Healing

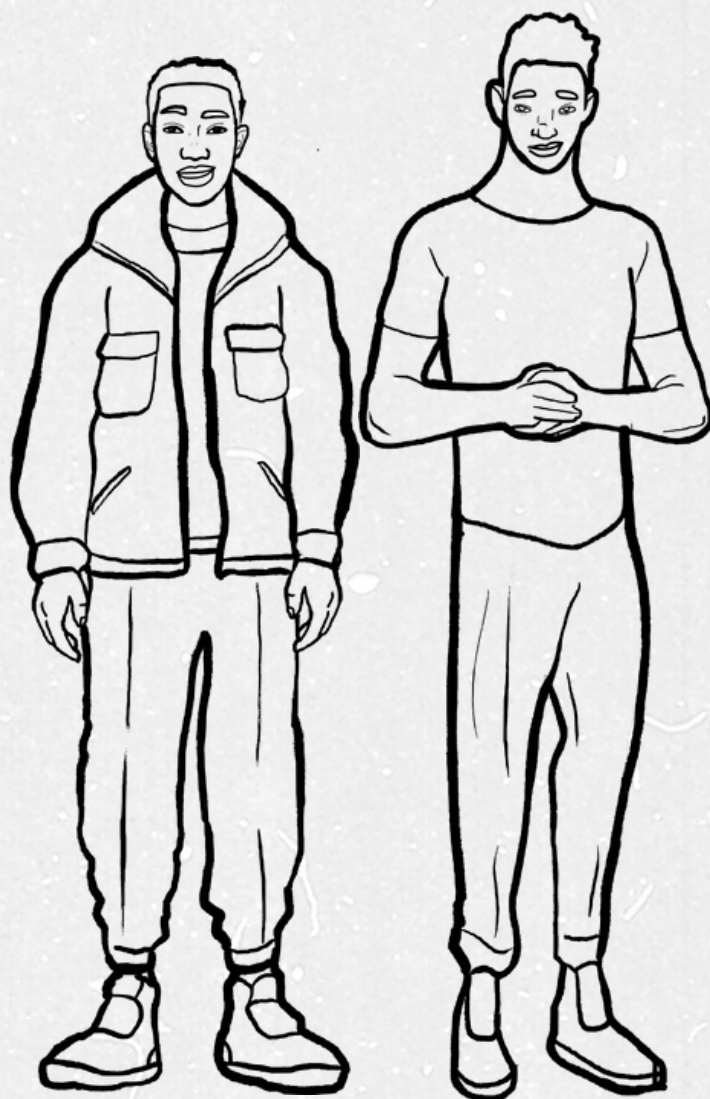
"SAWUBONA"





Witnessing the transformation of these young men has been a journey of reflection and learning. BHJ workshops may have marked their first encounter with a restorative space. The themes from their stories highlight the power of coaching and healing spaces as drivers of systemic change.

BHJ workshops offer a blueprint for cultivating spaces that nurture healing and empowerment. By recognising the humanity of every individual, providing long-term support, and creating environments where Black joy can flourish, we can challenge the status quo and build a future where everyone is seen, heard, and valued. The journey is ongoing, and the work is continuous, but with compassion, dedication, and a commitment to justice, we can create lasting change.





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# Appendices

## A. Monitoring Data

### Attendance of workshops

The three pilots consisted of 4 group workshop sessions. Attendance for each cohort shown below:

PILOT 1	#1	#2	#3	#4	TOTAL
BHJ-P1-1	1	1	0	1	3
BHJ-P1-2	1	1	1	1	4
BHJ-P1-3	1	1	1	1	4
BHJ-P1-4	1	0	0	1	2
BHJ-P1-5	1	1	1	1	4
BHJ-P1-6	1	1	1	1	4
BHJ-P1-7	1	0	0	1	2
<b>Total attendees</b>	<b>7</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>7</b>	
Attended all 4	4				
3 sessions	1				
2 sessions	2				

PILOT 2	#1	#2	#3	#4	TOTAL
BHJ-P1-1	1	1	1	1	4
BHJ-P1-2	1	1	1	1	4
BHJ-P1-3	1	1	1	1	4
BHJ-P1-4	1	1	1	0	3
BHJ-P1-5	1	1	1	1	4
BHJ-P1-6	1	1	1	1	4
BHJ-P1-7	1	1	1	1	4
BHJ-P1-8	1	0	0	1	2
BHJ-P1-9	1	1	1	1	4
<b>Total attendees</b>	<b>9</b>	<b>8</b>	<b>8</b>	<b>8</b>	
Attended all 4	7				
3 sessions	1				
2 sessions	1				





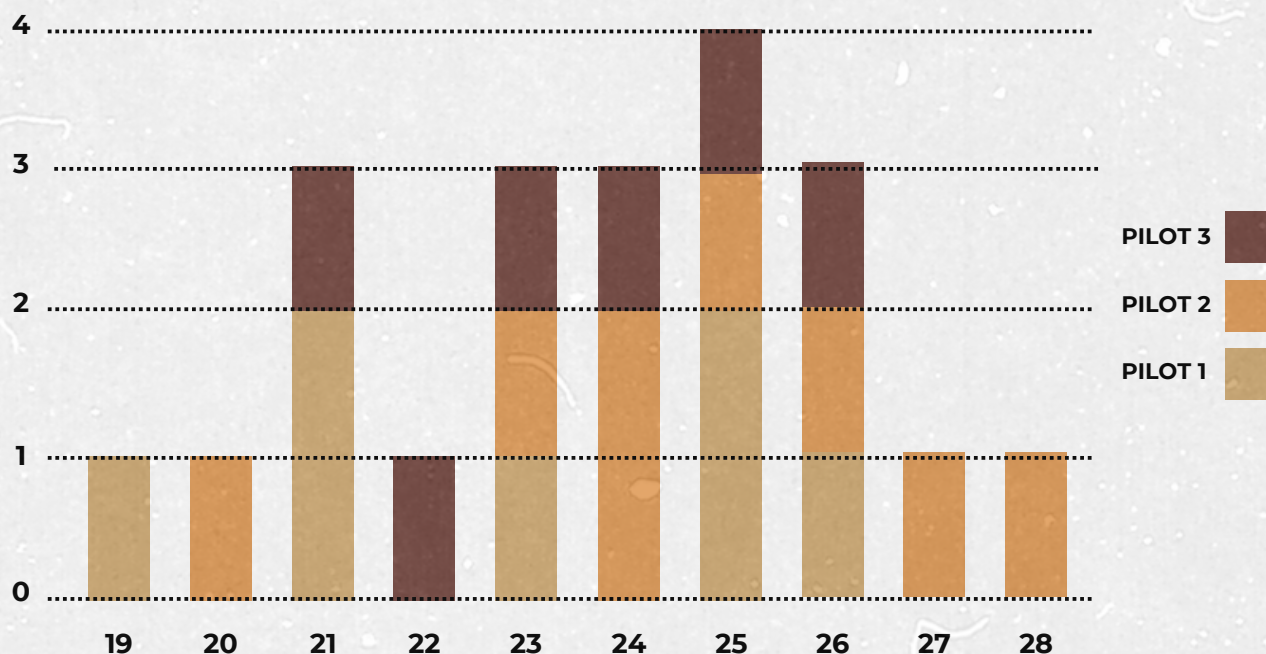
PILOT 3	#1	#2	#3	#4	TOTAL
BHJ-P1-1	1	1	1	1	4
BHJ-P1-2	1	1	1	1	4
BHJ-P1-3	1	1	1	1	4
BHJ-P1-4	1	1	1	1	4
BHJ-P1-5	1	1	1	1	4
BHJ-P1-6	1	6	1	1	4
<b>Total attendees</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>6</b>	
Attended all 4	6				

The attendance at workshops was good for a prison programme, with 77% (17/22) attending all four sessions, 9% (2/22) attending three and 14% (3/22) attending two sessions.

### Age during workshops

The 22 young men were aged between 19 and 28 at the time of their first workshop, with age distribution as shown below, with shading as per pilot attendance table on previous page. (N=21 due to one DOB being inaccurately recorded).

**Ages of participants in pilots 1, 2 and 3**



### Attendance of coaching sessions

All workshop attendees were offered a series of up to eight one-to-one coaching sessions. Two people did not attend any and two dropped out after one session. There was then a wide distribution across the range of numbers attended as shown below.





Attendance	Pilot 1	Pilot 2	Pilot 3	All Pilots
Two sessions	0	0	1	1
Three sessions	0	1	0	1
Four sessions	1	1	1	3
Five sessions	0	2	0	2
Six sessions	0	1	0	1
Seven sessions	1	2	0	3
Eight sessions	2	1	0	3

Several clients really took to coaching and convinced their coach and Service Delivery Manager to extend their coaching. Two completed 12 sessions, one attended 19 and the longest run attended a total of 26 one-to-one sessions over a period of six months.

## B. Biographies

### Jeffrey Wotherspoon

Jeffrey Wotherspoon is an Executive and Leadership Coach with accreditations from a wide range of coaching bodies in the business and systems specialism as well as a BSc (Hons) in Psychology. His expertise lies in creating solutions for individuals, organisations, and systems to help them progress from their current state to their desired goals. Jeffrey cut his coaching teeth working with Youth Offending Service (YOS) clients and young people at Kids Company and he continues to do a lot of work addressing the areas of heritage and culture through Leadership Programmes, workshops and keynote speeches. He is also a Facilitator and Course Leader on a leadership programme designed to explore obstacles and barriers facing aspiring Black and Asian leaders in social work and education.

### Michael Roper

Michael Roper is British born, the only child of Jamaican parents. He grew up on a council estate in Tottenham and then Edmonton. Brought up in a traditional Christian household he has explored Islam, Buddhism, Taoism, Spirituality and Ancient History. As a young man he volunteered in the Afro-Caribbean community across London teaching ancient African history to young people to build their self-confidence and self-reliance, as well as a coaching role in Garth Prison and the wider community prior to embarking on an extensive two-decade corporate career.





Following his 20 years in the corporate world Michael was unable to resist the calling back to his roots, communicating from his heart to help bring out the best and make a real difference in the lives of others.

## Samuel Onagoruwa

Samuel Onagoruwa's transition from a corporate background where the higher he rose *"the less people like myself I saw"* created a drive to do something meaningful for people that came from a similar community. Spark Inside and in particular, the BHJ provided him with that platform. He says: *"I'm proud and humbled to be a custodian of the Black Hero's Journey. The journey is ours. It grows, evolves and takes on a new identity as each coach delivers the message. Any inhibitions that I had around speaking my truth no longer exist because I stand behind the message. And what a message it is. To be in the room when realisation and transformation in the participants takes place is like asking someone where they were when they heard a famous speech or where they were when that penalty was missed or where they were when that record was broken."*

## Tony Weekes

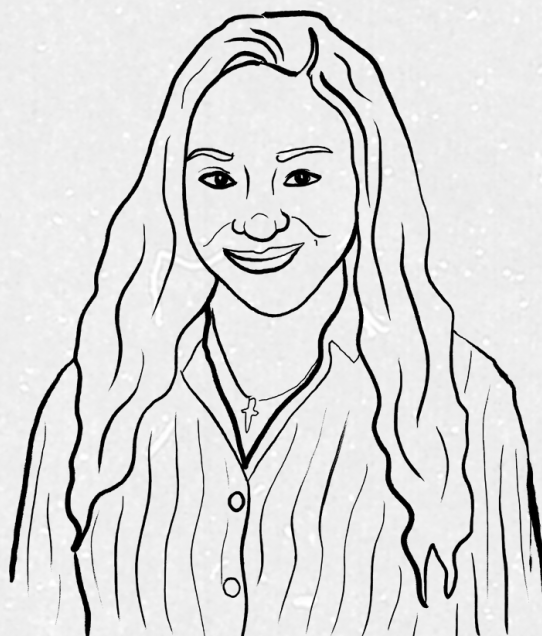
Tony Weekes is a Conflict Resolution Trainer with decades of experience working with a number of specialist organisations including Leap Confronting Conflict, Grit (AKA Youth at Risk). Tony designs, develops and delivers transformational, experiential programmes in prisons, youth work, corporate and education settings in the UK and internationally. His specialist areas are group offending, identity and prejudice, and creating safety.

## The Researcher

### Dr. Noreen Dera

**Chartered Clinical Psychologist, Associate Academic Fellow and Independent Research Consultant and Lead Author**

Growing up in Zimbabwe, I was enveloped by a close-knit community that offered a profound sense of belonging and security. I never felt alone; the support of my family and community was a constant, nurturing presence.





This strong foundation stands in stark contrast to the isolation and abandonment experienced by the young men I met as part of this project, who often feel alone - not just within their families, but within the broader system that often fails to see and support them.

My journey into this work was not a matter of chance; it was a deliberate and purposeful path driven by a deep sense of curiosity and a keen awareness of injustice. From a young age, I was drawn to the disparities and inequities around me. I didn't just notice these injustices - I felt compelled to act on them, to give voice to those who were silenced. This commitment has shaped my career, from advocating for equitable access to talking therapies for young Black men in primary care psychology, to exploring the experiences of young Black men in the mental health system during my doctoral research. Later, I developed the first ever psychological support service within a specialist Gangs Unit, dedicated to supporting young people affected by gang involvement. With each step, my focus has been on addressing the unique challenges faced by marginalised communities, particularly young Black men.

Being commissioned to ethically and humanely engage with the Black Hero's Journey programme and report on its impact was an honour. This project offered a unique opportunity to witness the transformative power of this legacy work and to document its profound effect on the lives of Black and Mixed Heritage men.

As a young Black woman and a mother to a young Black boy, this work carries a personal weight of duty and responsibility. At times, the injustices and barriers I have experienced and witnessed feel overwhelming. Yet, they have also fuelled my unwavering commitment to create change. I aim to use my voice, influence, and skills to elevate others - to make space for the voices and narratives of those who are so often overlooked, rather than speaking for them.

Through this audit, I sought to create a semblance of 'home' within the interview space for participants whose idea of home is often tumultuous and uncertain. For all the young men who bravely shared their stories, I hope this report captures your voices in a way that honours your courage, resilience, and wisdom. To all the readers and change-makers, may the stories shared here spark a flame that drives us towards a future that is fairer and more equitable for everyone.





# C. Acknowledgements

This report is the result of the work and commitment of a large number of people over several years.

Spark Inside is very grateful for the effort and support of the original Steering Group: Dr Patrick Williams, Adrian Stretch, Dr Kenny Imafidon (MBE), Remi Joseph-Salisbury and our academic consultant, Dr Bianca Bailey-Wilson. The work that they did inspired the second phase of the design process which built on the depth, passion and generosity of the three coaches who went on to deliver the pilot programme: Jeffrey Wotherspoon, Michael Roper and Samuel Onagoruwa. These design workshop sessions also benefited from the expert input of Tony Weekes and Cecilia Cappel and were facilitated by Tom Currie. One of the key sessions in Black Hero's Journey is about Black Joy and was inspired by a movement linked with the Black Joy Foundation in America and promoted in the UK through 'Black Joy' a collection of essays edited by Charlie Brinkhurst-Cuff and Timi Sotire. Black Hero's Journey also includes a discussion on history that benefits greatly from the research and teachings expressed in the incredible Lineage Timeline designed by Paul Obinna.

This report was written by Dr Noreen Dera who led the research and analysis and conducted all interviews with the young men in HMP Isis with a deep and caring approach that reflects in the stories that they chose to share with her. Noreen's work was supervised by Dr Roberta Babb. She was ably supported by her assistant Gabrielle Williams and a team that included Tyrone Johnson, who conducted a reflective focus group with one of the pilot cohorts and brought his expertise to bear on data analysis, Professor Frank Keating from Royal Holloway who provided oversight and perspective, and finally the meticulous, reliable, and wonderfully human Rob Fitzpatrick and Laura Thorne from Confluence Partnerships, who have been inspirational MEL partners to Spark Inside over these last years. This expertise were made possible through the generosity of Porticus UK, who deeply understand and value the purpose of this work. This report was designed, illustrated and laid out by Drew Sinclair.

Our final thanks and appreciation is for each young man who sat in circle with the Black Hero's Journey coaches and listened, resonated and added their voice to this rarely shared experience, this story that is their story. We hear you. We appreciate you. We see you. Sawubona!





# D. Interview Schedule

## Young men's individual experiences of engaging in the Black Hero's Programme

### Background Information

How did you come to be involved in the Black Hero's Programme?

What motivated you to be part of the programme?

Being curious about the background: Family life, heritage, wellbeing/mh background, life in prison (identity, how they see themselves)

### Accessing the programme

What was your experience of accessing (getting on) the programme?

Did you have any hopes about engaging in the programme?

Did you have any fears or concerns?

Follow up: can you tell me more about this

What helped you engage in the programme? Where there any obstacles?

What were your experiences of opening up and talking through the things with other group members?

Prompt(s):

Was this experienced as useful?

What worked?

What didn't?

Timings, structure, interactions

We are interested in the impact that BHJ has on participants so I'd like to find out what difference being on the programme made to you personally.

Prompt: Think back to how you were at the beginning of the programme and where you are now, is anything different for you now/have you noticed any changes?

Is anything different for you now?

What sense do you make of being a man engaging in the Black Hero's Programme alongside other men?

What have you learnt from others (showed you something new/different about yourself?) and what you can now take forward into your own personal life?





Prompts:

What do you think it says about you as a person?

Did you feel it went against or with what would be expected of you or not?

What are you most proud of?

Where there any aspects of your identity, for example gender, race, age brought up in the group? What was this like and what impact did this have on your experience?

## The Coach / Facilitator

What was your experience of the coach/facilitator?

Where there any other factors about the coach/facilitator that influenced your ability to connect/engage with them?

Prompts:

Style, personality, ethnicity, age, experience etc.

Is there anything you would change or say about your coach/facilitator?

Overall Reflections

What did you learn (if anything) about yourself in the process of being part of the programme?

What do you wish you knew before you started the programme that you know now after finishing (starting, engaging and ending) the programme? i.e. group experience

Coaching experience

What have you learnt from this process that you could share with other men who might be interested in the programme?

What have you learnt from this process that you could share with coaches/facilitators offering the programme?

Is there anything else you think is important for me to know as a researcher in order to understand your experiences of being part of the programme?

Any last comments or reflections?

Thank you for taking your time to discuss your experiences with me.







To find out more about Spark Inside and the work we do, please visit our website or contact us below.

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