

Reading-

Where It's At-

In Prison



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CLEARINGHOUSE FOR OFFENDER LITERACY PROGRAMS

Activated in August 1973, this project focuses on encouragement of reading programs and improved basic education technology to help reduce the high functional illiteracy rate among adult and juvenile offenders. Its premise is that basic reading and literacy skills are essential for enabling offenders to cope with modern society and achieve a lasting rehabilitative adjustment. Conducted as a joint effort with the American Correctional Association and National Association of Public Continuing and Adult Education, the Clearinghouse is supported by a grant from the U. S. Office of Education awarded through the Maryland State Department of Education.

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READING - WHERE IT'S AT - IN PRISONS

One of the most fundamental coping skills in American society—that of being able to read at an elementary school level—is not alive and well today in prisons. There is a large void in reliable reading achievement data for inmates, but the available figures leave little doubt that many who have lost in court, have previously lost, or have been lost, in the schools.

Today, some 400,000 offenders are incarcerated in the nation's correctional institutions—prisons, jails, reformatories, juvenile training schools, and other holding facilities. Nearly all of them will return to the community and most will do so in a short time span (—even for felons in prisons, the average stay in most states is less than two years). The nation's hopes for safe communities and for containment of crime largely rest on whether those individuals (and their successors) will abandon criminal behavior when they return to society. This is at best a difficult task and the record of our corrections system is not a good one.

Amidst all the problems, however, is the shocking fact that many individuals in prison—perhaps even half—may be functionally illiterate, i.e., unable to meet the minimal reading demands of modern society. It is difficult to imagine a more crippling bar to “rehabilitation”, “re-integration”, or productive job placement for the released offender than inability to read or write in a literate, complex society. Yet, unfortunately, that is “where it's at” in prisons—and the same probably holds for the nearly 1 million offenders under sentence in the community as probationers, parolees, and community corrections participants.

Reading Performance of the Correctional Population

The present data confirm that there are severe reading disabilities in the correctional population. Since no standard nationwide testing procedures exist, it is impossible to state scores or reading skill levels with authority. However, in 1973 a survey of all prisons, juvenile facilities and large jails was conducted by the Clearinghouse for Offender Literacy Programs. Over 300 institutions responded with reading program data. As can best be deter-

mined at this time and relying on scores self reported by the institutional education staff on a somewhat spotty regional distribution, the average reading attainment levels appeared as follows:

REGIONAL AREA	AVERAGES OF SCORES*	
	Adult	Youth
Southern States	6.1	—
North Central States	6.1	5.3
Mid-West States	5.5	5.3
Northeast States	5.5	3.7
Western States	5.1	4.5
Southeast States	4.5	4.6
Southwest States	3.4	—
National	5.1	4.6

If these data project a real situation (and they may not since the statistics are not fully relatable) there are probably a quarter million individuals, both adults and youth, incarcerated in this country on any one day who cannot cope with reading tasks as well as the average sixth grade student. Such individuals would be classified as functional illiterates by virtually every agency that has studied or worked intensively with the problem in recent years (e.g., Job Corps, U. S. Army, U. S. Office of Education).

These statistics present a truly devastating picture. They suggest that around half of the population of all our correctional institutions read somewhat less proficiently than the average twelve year old. Pursuit of employment and/or continued schooling will, at best, be difficult to undertake. This is because future success, in no small part, will depend on the very skill which is most infirm and least developed—that of reading.

* 6.1 Means a reading performance of 6th grade, 1 month; 5.5 a reading performance of 5th grade, 5 months, etc.

Success for the Offender — Jobs and Coping

Success, for inmates who have been released on parole or when sentences are completed, can be defined simply as “the ability to stay out of prison”. How do individuals stay out of prison and become successful in “straight society”? This, too, can be simply stated. They become employed and find success and satisfaction sufficient to keep them from reverting to crime. Another alternative is for the “ex-con” to get into the mainstream of educational programs and better prepare to cope with competition which already has a jump on him.

With solutions so simply stated, why is it then that percentages of those who leave prison are returned after a short period of time? The causes for recidivism are neither simply stated nor understood. They are numerous and complex involving individual makeup, environment, stress tolerance, degree of alienation, etc.. One of the basic factors in recidivism, however, might be traced to the individual’s inability to achieve and maintain gainful employment. This condition is severely complicated by the individual’s inability to read with any proficiency. How is it possible for an ex-offender to compete for jobs in society when he cannot read well enough to answer the questions on an employment application blank—or if he cannot secure a driver’s licence for the same reason?*

A Major Culprit — Reading

An improved reading ability, most certainly, will not cure every problem of those who seek normality and a livelihood on the “outside”. It will, however, increase an individual’s chances to compete when an employer is making a decision among job applicants or an admissions officer is considering an application to a school.

* These survival literacy problems, of course, are not confined to adjudicated offenders but exist broadly among disadvantaged, unemployed citizens. A 1970 Harris Poll on “survival literacy” indicated that (i) as much as half of unemployed youth, ages 16-21, may be functionally illiterate and (ii) perhaps 18.5 million Americans 16 and over may be in “marginal survival” status re ability to read, including over 4 million unable to qualify for welfare, up to 10 million for social security, up to 11 million for a drivers’ license, up to 14 million for a bank loan and over 40 million for Medicaid.

Reading deprivation cuts across the entire educational spectrum. It poses, therefore, an enormous and somewhat less-than-clear task that rehabilitation must first attend to before proceeding to more advanced programming. As a "tool skill", reading is germane and, indeed, critical to acquisition of the saleable vocational and occupational skills which pay off in employment opportunities. A decade of experience with federally-supported manpower programs for offenders has demonstrated the importance of remedial and basic education along with other pre-educational training as a necessary component of effective vocational preparation.*

One factor seriously complicates the literacy process for adults and youth who have fallen behind. Many, if not most, individuals who were unsuccessful in the traditional educational setting will avoid voluntarily placing themselves in circumstances similar to those where they previously encountered failure, i.e., back in the "classroom". Other conditions exist within institutions which further hamper efforts to match up inmates who have severe reading disabilities with programs to correct those problems.

Low Man on the Program Pole

The competition among the limited opportunities for an inmate's time and energy usually places basic education offerings at a disadvantage. An example of this competition can be found in the "prison industries" programs which have two factors operating strongly in their favor. First, they produce income for the institution. Understandably, prison administrators look favorably upon these activities in relation to other program priorities. Secondly, inmates are usually paid something for their work (although rates are quite low). These meager wages lay claim to the individual's motivation, particularly when in competition with education offerings taken on a voluntary basis.

Another competitor is the spectrum of vocational training available in a given institution. This holds for the inmate the

* Roberta Rovner-Pieczenik, *Manpower Research Monograph No. 28: A Review of Manpower R&D Projects in the Corrections Field (1963-1973)* U. S. Dept. of Labor

possibility of employment upon release. A well-equipped shop program has more "sex appeal" than the basic task of learning to read. Of course, the non-reading or remedial reader will have difficulty, at best, with any training which employs reading as the learning vehicle. Thus, the very potential of a vocational offering is rendered less effective by the reading deficit. This lesson has surfaced quite visibly in offender manpower programs:

"Often, offenders require remedial education, as well as vocational training, for job success. Project experience has shown that such education is most effective when given concurrently with vocational or pre-vocational training. Non-traditional teaching methods, materials, and settings, and non-traditional teachers, such as former project participants, have turned out to be more effective with offenders than traditional tools. *"The Offender as A Manpower Resource (1973)"**

Further complicating the prison reading scene is the lack of adequate educational budgets for either staff or materials. When queried in the Clearinghouse 1973 survey (p. 2), correctional educators stated that funds were not sufficient for their reading programs. More than 50% of responding adult institutions indicated that monies were insufficient for literacy and basic education programs.

A Difficult Scene for Improvement

The unintentional isolation of correctional education staff from other professional educators creates a situation which militates against innovation. In-service professional development activities for most correctional educators are few and far between. Thirty seven percent of the institutions in the Clearinghouse 1973 survey sample confirmed that they have staff in-service development opportunities. They ranged in frequency from weekly (probably staff meetings) to once every five years. Of far greater

* ABA Clearinghouse on Offender Employment Restrictions (13 pp. — pamphlet reprint of report from 7/4/73 issue of *Manpower Information Service*).

significance, however, is the fact 63 percent of the responding institutions provided no in-service sessions at all.

Another index of quality education is student-teacher ratios. The 1973 survey carried out by the Clearinghouse indicated that such ratios varied between five-to-one and 503-to-one. This statistic, while not the only indicator of quality education, highlights the variability of service (and perhaps the quality of service) representative of correctional education programs.

Much is known about teaching individuals to read. However, we often ignore much of what has been learned about this complicated process. The reasons are several. First, it is always more comfortable to continue doing what we have learned to do and can most easily accomplish—even when results are poor and better ways exist. That is, we teach large groups of individuals as if they were the same and had the same needs. Second, we ignore the fact that offenders who are in institutions and are poor readers have lost at education. They have been rejected by, or have rejected, the very system and learning approaches to which we keep subjecting them. The results of these infirmities in correctional education are easily evaluated. They fail! It is all too common for literacy classes in prison to lose most of the enrollment before the course ends. After more frustration, the students drop out again and are further hardened against returning for another shot of failure.

What are the Alternatives?

Alternative learning systems must be considered if there is truly interest in rehabilitation. Functionally illiterate individuals must be treated for specific educational ills:

- We must diagnose weaknesses and prescribe specific activities which have meaning and are attainable for the individual.
- Competition needs to be considered. Losers do not compete well—systems which employ commonplace approaches such as programmed instruction and the use of cassettes to personalize instruction must be viewed as real possibilities.
- Programs which have stated behavioral objectives, as opposed to mere coverage of materials, make sense (e.g., ability to pick

out words containing long vowel sounds, identification of compound words, selection of root words or words with prefixes or suffixes). These are measurable and, thus, students can be “plugged in” at appropriate places in the learning spectrum and moved along as each objective is internalized.

- Staff members must take on new roles. Teachers in the classic sense—that of being tellers and answerers of questions—have little utility when learning should be task-oriented for individuals with differing needs. To address tasks appropriate to needs, whether involving comprehension skills, phonic skills, tenses of verbs, or other literacy components, literacy educators must become “managers of learning”. They must function as cooperators with individuals and emphasize work on a one-to-one basis and in small groups. When a truly exciting learning situation is viewed, it is often hard to discern who is the teacher and who is the learner. And this learning style is perhaps more desperately needed in prisons, which so deeply threaten self concept, than anywhere else.
- Use of paraprofessional and volunteer manpower must also be considered for offender literacy programs. They multiply the effectiveness of the teacher and provide an increased one-to-one capability.

What are the Needs

Program improvement in literacy training permits few shortcuts. It is reliant upon a system which provides:

- adequate budget
- staff development opportunities
- a support system for new approaches and development activities
- a cooperative framework among the competing education and rehabilitation activities available to inmates
- involvement of the total correctional staff in educational programs—at least so that they understand and support what is being attempted.

The cost to the public of keeping an individual in prison or a juvenile facility varies from \$5,000 to over \$15,000 a year. It makes sense, therefore, on a purely economic basis and without reference to humanitarian considerations to do everything possible to keep individuals out of institutions and keep those who are in prisons from returning.

Educational opportunities, and particularly reading, are much less expensive for society than returning an offender to the institution. When successful, they provide a permanent tool (unlike the "gate money" allowance given to a released inmate) that the prisoner will never lose throughout his life.

What is Being Done

If literacy education can mean so much, what then should be done to combat the "reading blahs" within correctional institutions and increase the offender's chances for success upon release?

At present, there are some bright spots in a few institutions. Programs in reading geared to the diverse backgrounds and motivations of inmates are beginning to surface. Thus,

- the U. S. Bureau of Prisons, with federal "Right to Read" grants has launched demonstrations at two institutions specifically designed to strengthen reading skills and featuring specialists (graduate reading degrees), paid tutors, and individual diagnosis and prescription.
- the Rehabilitation Research Foundation in Elmore, Alabama has developed and field-tested an individualized programmed reading course for adult inmates (now being used nationally in a variety of correctional systems)
- the Fairfax County Jail in Virginia has a thriving reading program administered by community tutors using a simple but effective reading technology (Laubach Literacy Program)
- the Kennedy Youth Center in Morgantown, Virginia has responded to needs of a short-stay population by a "quick movement program" bringing non-readers to minimum reading levels in only 10 organized workbooks supported by "token economy" incentives

- the Cook County Jail in Chicago has adopted a "technical management of reading approach", i.e., use of individualized materials and teaching machines along with contract agreements between staff and offenders on achievement of reading goals, all linked to job skill and job placement support.
- the Lorton Youth Center serving D. C. Offenders has a special program for individuals under 7th grade reading levels which works with visual, perceptual, behavioral and auditory problems in addition to routine reading handicaps.

Program information of this kind is available on request to the Clearinghouse for Offender Literacy Programs and is indexed according to institution type, e.g., adult, juvenile, male, female, maximum security, open setting, etc. It usually includes the name of individuals who can respond with detailed information about their programs. Inquiry is also invited about reading-oriented workshops conducted by the Clearinghouse and others for correctional educators and volunteers which present "systems" and innovative approaches for reading programs in institutions.

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If you are concerned about developing or upgrading the reading capability within your institution or state penal system, why not contact the Clearinghouse for Offender Literacy Programs, 1705 DeSales Street, N. W., Washington, D. C. 20036. Staff are ready to respond with program information, a compendium of published reading programs, information concerning staff development, special focus materials, and tailored responses to individual inquiries.

CLEARINGHOUSE PUBLICATIONS

Clearinghouse Project Brief	(Aug. 1973—2 pp.)
50-State Correctional System Survey on Literacy Training, Testing & School Districts	(Oct. 1973—10 pp.)
Potential of Correctional School District Organizations	(Dec. 1973—8 pp.)
Reading Program Resource Manual for Correctional Adult Basic Education	(Jan. 1974—200 pp.)
Correctional Reading Needs Assessment	(May 1974—34 pp.)
Reading Test Resource Handbook for Correctional Education	(June 1974—50 pp.)
Series—Profiles of Correctional Reading Programs	(Commencing May 1974)

The percentage of inmates in all institutions who cannot read or write is staggering. . . the figures on literacy alone are enough to make one wish that every sentence imposed could include a provision that would grant release when the prisoner had learned to read and write, to do simple arithmetic, and then to develop some basic skill that is saleable in the market place of the outside world to which he must some day return and in which he must compete.

WARREN E. BURGER

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