

## Enhancing Services to Inmates with Learning Disabilities: Systemic Reform of Prison Literacy Programs

By

Juliana M. Taymans, Ph.D.

and

Mary Ann Corley, Ph.D.

c/o:

Mary Ann Corley

Director,

National Center for Literacy and Social Justice

720 Rural Street

River Ridge, LA 70123

(504) 738-1093

macorley@earthlink.net

- or -

taymans@gwu.edu

### Abstract

Systemic reform has gained ground in education policy over the past decade but has been slow to catch on in adult literacy and correctional education programs, particularly as it relates to services to adults with learning disabilities (LD). The notion of systemic reform is rooted in the belief that, with appropriate changes, programs can improve outcomes for all learners. Fundamental to a successful change effort for improving services to inmates with LD are knowledge and awareness about the manifestations and consequences of LD-not just for correctional education staff but also for the correctional system in general. This article presents principles of systemic reform that can guide correctional education staff through a process designed to improve educational services for inmates with LD. Steps to systemic reform of literacy programs include the following: (1) bring all the stakeholders together to create a shared vision and develop an action plan; (2) enlist administrative support; (3) provide meaningful and ongoing professional development opportunities; (4) identify resources; and (5) continuously monitor and improve the change process.

### Enhancing Services to Inmates with Learning Disabilities: Systemic Reform of Prison Literacy Programs

The National Adult Literacy Survey (NALS) indicates that the majority of inmates of correctional facilities have lower literacy skills and lower educational attainment than that of the adult population of the United States in general (Kirsch, Jungeblut, Jenkins, and Kolstad, 1993). Moreover, youth in correctional facilities, on average, perform three years below grade level (Rider-Hankins, 1992). We know that the presence of learning disabilities (LD) has been linked to higher rates of juvenile delinquency (Goldstein & Glick, 1987). A national follow-up study of students with disabilities found that 20 percent of students with LD had been arrested two or less years after school exit and that 31 percent had been arrested three to five years after leaving secondary school. Students with disabilities who had dropped out of school had an even higher

arrest rate; 56.4 percent had been arrested by three to five years after high school (SRI International, 1993).

These statistics have implications for correctional education programs regarding the delivery of services to inmates. In fact, they have implications for the correctional system in general. From wardens and correctional officers to educational program leaders, teachers, tutors, and counselors, there is a need for increased information about, and understanding of, learning disabilities, their manifestations, and their consequences. This information and knowledge can help correctional educators better serve this population. The purpose of this article is to describe principles of systemic reform that can guide correctional literacy staff in a process to improve educational services for inmate-students with LD.

#### Definition

The term 'LD' refers to a broad array of disorders, including disorders in one or more of the basic processes involved in understanding or using spoken or written language. Learning disabilities may manifest as difficulties with one or more of the following: listening, speaking, reading, writing, computation, thinking, memory, and sequencing and organizational skills. In addition, characteristics such as impulsivity, poor social skills, and difficulty with attention may compound problems for persons with LD.

Learning disabilities are now widely recognized as lifelong and persistent: children with LD do not "outgrow" the disability. Learning disabilities are likely to significantly affect not only academic achievement but every facet of life, including memory, sequencing, following directions, and time management.

In recent years, there has been growing interest among adult education and literacy professionals in the topic of LD. As recognition has increased concerning the links between LD and academic performance and between LD and retention of adult learners, literacy professionals are asking the following questions: (1) What are learning disabilities and how do they affect adult learners? (2) How can I determine which learners have LD? (3) What strategies are most effective for teaching someone with LD?

#### Prevalence of LD in Adults

Determination of the presence of LD in an individual must be made by a professional clinician or diagnostician licensed to administer psycho-educational test batteries. These tests, which are both costly and time-consuming to conduct, are not administered widely to adults. As a result, data do not exist that will allow us to state with certainty a research-based prevalence rate of LD among adults; however, the estimate is generally accepted to be approximately 15 percent.

For subsets of the general population, such as persons enrolled in adult literacy programs, we can assume a higher incidence rate (Reder, 1995). There are varying estimates for specific segments of the population, but the estimates were obtained, not through formal evaluation and documentation, but through instructor observation, administrators' educated guesses, and client self-reports. For example, the US Employment and Training Administration (1991) estimated the incidence of LD among Job Training and Partnership Act Title IIA (PL 97-300) recipients to be 15 percent to 23 percent. Adult Basic Education (ABE) directors have estimated the prevalence of adults with LD in ABE classes to range from 10 percent to more than 50 percent (Ryan & Price, 1993). Other estimates have been proposed for various subpopulations, but all lack validation data. Although we do not have exact percentages, we do know that there appears to be an over-representation of persons with LD among correctional populations.

#### Challenges and Benefits of Providing Literacy Education in a Prison Setting

The challenges of providing educational programming in a correctional setting are multifaceted. Given that the primary goal of a correctional facility is to provide security, it is not uncommon for instruction to be interrupted in the interest of security or for inmate-students to be transferred to other institutions, to meet with their attorneys, or to be scheduled to appear in court. Educational staff must deal with the continual and unpredictable turnover of students. During instruction, teachers are faced with the ever-present challenge of finding the right balance between

"being correctional and being educational" (Wright, 1998, p. 53). Teachers must find ways to motivate learners to become goal-oriented despite the present world of confinement that contributes to limited expectations and motivations for the learner.

In addition, whereas most adult literacy teachers try to find ways to relate new learning to learners' prior experiences, this may not always be appropriate in correctional settings: some offenders have life experiences that are not socially appropriate and therefore not a reliable resource for further learning (Williamson, 1992). Moreover, a correctional education program that strives for reduced recidivism rates will focus its curriculum on teaching basic skills within the context of social and ethical decision-making; however, there are few textbooks available commercially that integrate ethical decision-making and basic skills instruction.

Yet another challenge for correctional educators relates to the history of substance abuse among inmates. The National Institute of Corrections Academy (as cited in Montross & Montross, 1994, p. 183) estimates that as much as 80 percent of criminal activity results, either directly or indirectly, from substance abuse. Although the causes differ, the symptoms and manifestations of substance abuse and of learning disabilities often overlap (Montross & Montross, 1994).

Despite the challenges inherent in teaching in a prison environment, educators may realize benefits not often found in community literacy programs. Many correctional education programs employ teachers full-time and can offer more hours of instruction than many community programs can. This is of particular significance for persons with LD: it has been well established that persons with LD require intensity of instruction. Inmates who attend instructional programs full-time five days a week are likely to make greater strides than students who attend community programs for four hours a week. In addition, correctional facilities often provide integrated and interrelated vocational and academic training, as opposed to many community programs where basic skills instruction is offered in isolation from other programs and services. Typically, correctional facilities house a school, complete with dedicated classrooms, whereas many community-based adult literacy programs use shared space in libraries, schools, faith-based organizations, and community agencies.

#### Systemic Reform of Correctional Education Programs

Reagen and Stoughton (1976) proposed that the role of correctional education is, among other things, to function as an agent of change for both the inmate and the system. The role of change agent is particularly meaningful for inmates who have LD. An emerging trend in adult literacy programs is the need for systemic reform aimed at enhancing services to adult with LD. But what, exactly, does systemic reform mean for correctional education?

The notion of systemic reform has gained ground in K-12 education policy over the past decade. It is rooted in the belief that, with appropriate changes, programs can improve outcomes for all learners (Smith & O'Day, 1991; Levinson, 1992). Systemic reform embodies three integral components: (1) the promotion of ambitious outcomes for all learners; (2) the alignment of policy and action to promote such outcomes; and (3) the restructuring of the governance system to support improved outcomes (Smith & O'Day, 1991).

Within adult education programs, systemic reform has been slow to catch on, particularly as it relates to services for adults with LD. Few professionals have been adequately prepared to work with adults who have, or who may have, LD. Moreover, advocacy efforts on behalf of adults with LD currently are inadequate (National Joint Committee on Learning Disabilities, 1994). Literacy program staff may not be familiar with available screening instruments and curricular materials appropriate for use with adults who may have LD. Finally, literacy programs may not have established linkages with community agencies and other stakeholder groups that can improve access to resources and services for adults with LD (National Adult Literacy and Learning Disabilities Center, 1999).

If correctional education programs are to provide more effective services to adults with LD, program staff must reflect on the current level of service and consider whether and how it can

effect changes that will result in enhanced services to this population. But the notion of change can be frightening and can seem overwhelming.

In 1993, the National Institute for Literacy funded a National Adult Literacy and Learning Disabilities Center (National ALLD Center). The goals of the National ALLD Center were to raise awareness among practitioners, policymakers, and researchers about issues of LD in adults, to add to the knowledge base about LD in adults through a research and development effort, and to build capacity among literacy programs to enhance the quality of services provided to adults with LD. The Center represented a first effort to bring together professionals in the fields of adult literacy and learning disabilities on a professional advisory board.

The National ALLD Center's major effort was the research, development, and publication of *Bridges to Practice: A Research-based Guide for Literacy Practitioners Serving Adults with Learning Disabilities* (1999), a series of guidebooks with accompanying video and professional development manual. The purpose of the Bridges to Practice program is to encourage systemic reform of literacy programs to enhance services to adults with LD. The Bridges to Practice materials and training were specifically designed to help literacy programs think through the change process in making program services more responsive to the needs of persons with LD. Bridges to Practice lists five steps critical to initiating the change process:

1. Bring all stakeholders together to create a shared vision and develop an action plan.

To embark on the change process, correctional education program leaders must first engage staff members and other stakeholders to raise awareness about the characteristics and manifestations of LD. The more stakeholder groups that are brought into the change process as partners, the more likely that systemic change will occur. The formation of collaborative partnerships can create or improve access to resources. In addition, advocating for changes in policies and procedures is more likely to be effective and get attention of decision-makers when it represents the united effort of multiple stakeholders. The correctional education program may elect to bring together stakeholders representing some of the following groups: Department of Vocational Rehabilitation or Department of Rehabilitative Services; disability councils and advocacy groups; job-training programs in area businesses; local chapters of International Dyslexia Association and the Learning Disabilities Association of America; postsecondary educational institutions; private psychologists and educational diagnosticians; vision and hearing screening services; vocational education and training programs; local businesses and industries; Department of Corrections/ Department of Justice; and family counselors.

Correctional officers, wardens, and officials from the Department of Corrections or the Department of Justice should be in the process so that they gain awareness of the information processing difficulties encountered by persons with LD. The consequences of LD play out daily in correctional settings across the country in scenarios such as the following: inmates who cannot attend to multi-step orders issued by correctional officers appear to be uncooperative and antagonistic; inmates who cannot readily process auditory information have difficulty responding to questions in court; inmates who have difficulty with sequencing cannot tell their side of the story with accuracy and be seen as credible witnesses.

Following the process of raising awareness about LD, correctional education leaders can engage all stakeholders in a process of visioning: what would the ideal program look like if its services were responsive to the needs of inmates with LD? Would it include the services of professional diagnosticians who can evaluate inmates who are suspected of having LD? Would it include the use of inmates as peer tutors to extend learning beyond the classroom? Would it include transition services with job placement counselors and job developers who can arrange placements for inmates upon their release? Would it include counseling support so that persons with LD understand their strengths as well as their challenges and learn to advocate for the accommodations they will need to meet with success in the world of work? Would it include the formation of support groups for inmates with LD to learn to cope with the challenges of their disabilities? Once a shared vision has been articulated, the staff and stakeholders must review the

services currently being offered. This is essentially a process of self-examination that leads to identification of areas for improvement, which, in turn, forms the basis for strategic planning.

For correctional education programs to be successful, they must include transition strategies between the institution and the community. Effective transition often is a key component in deterring recidivism (Pollard, Pollard, Rojewski, & Meers, 1997). Transition involves a continuum of services that extends beyond the institutional setting, with community involvement and agency coordination and collaboration as the hallmarks of successful transition programs (Pollard et al., 1997).

2. Enlist administrative support.

Although teachers and tutors may be able to make modifications to the teaching-learning process, they cannot effect broad-sweeping systemic change by themselves. For change to be successful, leadership must be present. The change process needs the support of program administrators, from the level of warden and chief correctional officers to the level of correctional education principal or program leader. Program leaders can assemble the various stakeholder groups and invite them to participate in the creation of a shared vision of comprehensive services to inmates with LD. Administrators who are committed to the process of systemic change also will provide opportunities for program staff members to meet regularly to discuss their progress toward goals.

3. Provide meaningful and ongoing professional development opportunities.

Well-prepared teachers are essential to a program's reform efforts. Teachers need to understand the nature of learning disabilities, their manifestations and consequences, both positive and negative, for adult learners. They also need to be familiar with legal issues associated with services to persons with LD, and they should be comfortable with research-based practices and instructional strategies for effectively serving persons with LD.

Some inmates enter the correctional system with documented diagnoses of LD from their days in the K-12 system. Others enter the system not only undocumented but also unaware that they may have learning disabilities or that LD may be the cause of their difficulties in processing spoken and written language. For undocumented learners, staff may wish to initiate a screening process to determine the likelihood of LD. To do this, they will need information about appropriate screening instruments for adults. They will then need to select from among available instruments, receive training in the appropriate use of the selected instruments, and determine where in the intake process they will include screening for LD. Program staff will need to determine whether LD screening will be administered to all inmates during the intake process, along with academic skills testing and placement, or only to those students who exhibit earmarks of LD in the performance of academic tasks.

Staff members must understand the differences between screening and diagnostic testing, and when and how to appropriately refer inmates for diagnostic testing. Teachers need to be familiar with current research-based strategies for teaching persons with LD. This includes knowing how to select appropriate curricular materials as well as how to adapt the materials to suit learners' needs. It includes an understanding of direct, explicit, multi-sensory instruction that includes a motivational context for learning and multiple opportunities for practice and reinforcement (Hughes, 1998, Swanson, 1999).

Part of effective instruction for persons with LD involves helping learners to acknowledge, own, and value their strengths as well as their challenges resulting from disabilities. Self-knowledge is important for setting realistic goals and for making plans to reach those goals. Instructional staff might benefit from training that helps them to encourage the development of self-determination and self-advocacy skills in their learners - content rarely found in commercially available adult literacy texts.

Professional development activities should be ongoing, with each subsequent activity building on previous ones. They should include opportunities for mentoring and peer coaching among instructional staff to ensure that desired changes translate to practice. This requires an

investment in high-quality professional development and a long-term commitment to increasing the success of adults with LD.

#### 4. Identify resources.

Change takes resources: it demands people, money, supplies, facilities, time. Clearly, correctional education programs will need to identify additional resources to successfully implement the change process. Resources needed may include increased contact time with learners, increased opportunities for high-quality professional development, specialized program staff (lead teachers or learning disabilities specialists), and screening and instructional materials.

Strong collaborative partnerships with local stakeholders can be invaluable to program planners in identifying and helping secure access to resources. The more linkages, relationships, and networks that are developed, the better the chances are of a successful change process. Linkages develop commitment, help with resources and support, empower and train people, and provide personnel for facilitation and leadership. In schools where change succeeds, these kinds of activities occurred more frequently than in other schools (Fullan & Miles, 1992).

#### 5. Continuously monitor and improve the change process.

Following the development of an action plan to improve services, program staff will need to continuously monitor their progress toward goals and make adjustments, as appropriate. Staff may wish to consider the following: How will success of the change process be measured, i.e., what are criteria for evaluating change? Who will provide the evaluation input, and what form will it take? Who will review the results? How will the results be used? Who will monitor the desired outcomes? How will new ideas and needs be incorporated? How will the need for continuous improvement be communicated and encouraged?

Change is a slow process that demands ongoing attention and support. It usually involves three phases: (1) initiation: deciding on an agenda and beginning work; (2) implementation: putting the innovation into action, in context; and (3) institutionalization or continuation: seeing the innovation in place and integrated into the daily life of the correctional educational setting. Moving through these phases can take three to five years for stable implementation and predictable outcomes (Fullan, 1991). However, the rewards are well worth the efforts involved. Systemic reform to make correctional education programs more LD-appropriate can mean the difference between dependency and self-reliance, between success and failure, between rehabilitation and recidivism for inmates with LD. And it can mean the introduction to society of self-determined, successful, and contributing citizens.

## References

- Fullan, M. (1991). Overcoming barriers to educational change. Paper commissioned by the Office of the Under Secretary of the US Department of Education for the New American Schools Development Corporation initiative.
- Fullan, M.G., & Miles, M.B. (1992). Getting reform right: What works and what doesn't. *Phi Delta Kappan*, 73(10), 744-752.
- Goldstein, A. & Glick, B. (1987). *Aggression replacement training*. Champagne, IL: Research Press.
- Hughes, C. (1998). Effective instruction for adults with learning disabilities. In B.K. Lenz, N.A. Sturmski, & M.A. Corley (Eds.). *Serving adults with learning disabilities: Implications for effective practice* (pp. 34-50). Washington, DC: National Adult Literacy and Learning Disabilities Center, Academy for Educational Development (ERIC Document Reproduction Service No. 430 078).
- Kirsch, I.S., Jungeblut, A., Jenkins, L., & Kolstad, A. (1993). *Adult literacy in America: A first look at the results of the National Adult Literacy Survey*. Washington, DC: National Center for Education Statistics, US Department of Education.
- Levinson, C.Y., with the assistance of D. Massell (1992).

Systemic reform: Literature review. New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University, Consortium for Policy Research in Education.

Montross, K. & Montross, J. (1997). Characteristics of adult incarcerated students: effects on instruction. *The Journal of Correctional Education*, 48(4), 179-186.

National Adult Literacy and Learning Disabilities Center, (1999). *Bridges to practice: A research-based guide for literacy practitioners serving adults with learning disabilities*. (A project of the National Institute for Literacy). Washington, DC: Academy for Educational Development.

National Joint Committee on Learning Disabilities (1994).

Collective perspectives on issues affecting learning disabilities: Position papers and statements. Austin, TX: Pro-Ed.

Pollard, R., Pollard, C., Rojewski, J., & Meers, G., (1997).

Adjudicated youth with disabilities: Transition strategies in correctional environments. *The Journal of Correctional Education*, 48(3), 127-134.

Reagen, M.V., & Stoughton, D.M. (1976). *School behind bars:*

A descriptive overview of correctional education in the American prison system. Metuchen, NJ: Scarecrow Press.

Reder, S. (1995). *Literacy, education, and learning disabilities*. Portland, OR: Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory.

Rider-Hankins, P (1992). *The educational process in juvenile correctional schools: Review of the research*. Chicago, IL: American Bar Association. (ERIC Document Reproduction Service ED 349 436).

Ryan, A.G., & Price, L. (1993). Learning disabilities in adult basic education: A survey of current practices. *Journal of Postsecondary Education and Disability*, 10(3), 31-40.

Smith, M.S. & O'Day, J. (1991). Systemic school reform. In S.H. Fuhrman and B. Malen (Eds.), *The Politics of Curriculum and Testing, 1990 Yearbook of the Politics of Education Association*. London and Washington, DC: Falmer Press, 233-267.

Swanson, H.L. (1999). Instructional components that predict treatment outcomes for students with learning disabilities: Support for a combined strategy and direct instruction model. *Learning Disabilities Research*, 14, 129-140.

SRI International. (1993, December). *The transition experiences of young people with disabilities: Implications for policy and programs*. Menlo Park, CA: SRI International.

US Employment and Training Administration. (1991). *The learning disabled in employment and training programs (Research and Evaluation Series 91-E)*. Washington, DC: US Department of Labor.

Williamson, L. (1992). Education and incarceration. *The Journal of Correctional Education*, 43(1), 15-22.

Wright, R.L. (1998). *Teacher's voices, teacher's knowledge:*

Reflections on the (new?) *Journal of Correctional Education*. *The Journal of Correctional Education*, 49(2), 45-58.

Juliana Taymans, Ph.D., professor of special education George Washington University, is responsible for the preparation of graduate students seeking teaching licensure in learning disabilities. She has authored/co-authored four intervention programs aimed at improving thinking skills of adult offenders. She also is a member of the original national training team for *Bridges to Practice: A Research-based Guide for Literacy Practitioners Serving Adults with Learning Disabilities*. Her recent book is *Unlocking Potential: College and Other Choices for People with LD and AD/HD*.

Mary Ann Corley, Ph.D., is Director of the National Center for Literacy and Social Justice. As former Director of the National Adult Literacy and Learning Disabilities (ALLD) Center, she led the research, development, and training team of Bridges to Practice, a nationally funded and disseminated professional development program for literacy providers who teach adults with learning disabilities. She is a consultant, author, and professional development specialist on adult literacy, with emphasis on GED preparation, workplace literacy, and learning disabilities and is a frequent presenter on these topics at state and national conferences.