

Historical Development of a Model for Correctional Education and Literacy
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Abstract

This article reviews the 30 year history of the evolution of a correctional educational literacy model. It is based on the author's personal experience as a resource teacher, a federal monitor, an auditor for CEA and numerous visits to correctional education programs across the US. The article is also based on a review of a number of important publications and studies in adult and correctional education. The model is not definitive because literacy and correctional education continue to evolve.

Introduction

Just out of college in 1967 as a brand new substitute teacher in a Chicago public middle school, I was assigned the kids who were not performing well. As the newest teacher in the school I also had the least amount of preparation and background for this assignment. It was the beginning years of the federal Title I program. The federal government was beginning to encourage school systems to help the students who were just not making the grade.

Fortunately for me and the students, there was a talented Title I resource teacher who taught me how to use informal reading assessments and basic instructional techniques. I struggled but seemed to be able to help some of the students. One thing I realize now but did not know then - these were the kids destined for academic failure and who became most of our correctional population.

After teaching in Chicago for just one half year I went on to Georgetown University to study for a masters in linguistics and Italian. In 1969 I started teaching Italian and English at a Washington, D.C. public high school. Given my experience, the principal assigned me several Title I reading classes as well. Once again, one of the newest teachers with the least experience was given the toughest students, at least academically. They were not behavior problems as much as system failures. Most experienced teachers shied away from teaching non- or low level-readers. I was beginning to learn something about the state of teacher training and the resulting high level of illiteracy.

At the high school we were able to obtain a special Title I project grant and build our resources. I had also decided to take graduate classes at the University of Maryland Reading Center to better equip myself for the task at hand. However, reading programs in the 1970s were geared almost exclusively toward elementary school children. It was widely believed in the profession that students who had not learned to read well by high school would never read well. A real task was finding good remedial materials for teenagers and appropriate instructional techniques. Books filled with bullfrogs and balloons were not working in the high school reading room. We actually set up a reading laboratory in the Washington, D.C. high school where doctoral candidates from the Universities of Maryland and George Washington could try out new ideas and materials for high school level remediation.

1970's & 1980's

By the mid 1970s, while fully immersed in my doctoral residency, an opportunity changed the course of my professional career. I took advantage of a project to train teachers in a Title I program for young felons in the Maryland prison system. The rest is history; I have been in prison ever since.

In the mid 1970s there were basically two kinds of teachers in Maryland correctional classrooms - vocational instructors and academic teachers who taught adult basic education or high school equivalency (ABE/GED) programs. As the reading resource teacher for the system, I saw few other educational programs. Teach them to read and to learn a job skill - that was the model for corrections. The vocational teachers wanted students to achieve at least an eighth grade reading level or a GED before entering their programs. The ABE/GED teachers wanted students who could survive in a group or individualized classroom setting but who did not require intensive one-to-one instruction. Most classes had one inmate aide who assisted the teacher with record keeping and grading workbook papers. Academic instruction was geared strictly toward obtaining the GED and books were mostly warmed over elementary school materials. A few teachers had discovered that adults could learn to read using materials such as newspapers or checkbooks. But most taught skills in the abstract because that was the design of the GED before the 1988 revision. The pre-1988 GED did not require a writing sample and all answers were given in a multiple-choice format. Functional reading and math had not yet become popular.

As a resource teacher for Title I classes, I wanted to convince teachers that they could actually reach and teach non- or low level-readers, that techniques such as language experience and directed reading activities could work for them, that materials like newspapers, sports magazines, the Bible or the Koran might interest students and form the content for skill instruction. As I worked with the correctional educators in Maryland I saw they relied on open entry/open exit, self-paced programs. Many avoided intensive tutoring or instructional techniques for the learning disabled. Teachers moved around the room or sat at their desks, assisting students who were working on different levels or in different materials. As I worked throughout the state I saw that accommodations were made for grade level differences, but few teachers I worked with employed techniques that required them to work with one student for extended periods of time or which varied the type of instruction to fit the students learning style or disability. In the last 15 years I have traveled around the country visiting programs in many states and have come to appreciate that this kind of individualized instruction continues to characterize many programs today.

The prison administrators in Maryland were often suspicious of inmates working as paraprofessionals because of the authority role they could assume over other inmates. Only a couple of institutions allowed inmates to actually tutor. Even though standardized testing demonstrated there were hundreds of completely illiterate inmates who needed help, schools program could not generally enlist inmates as tutors.

For many years the general model for correctional education and literacy has been a version of the ABE/GED/Vocational Education paradigm. Among vocational or career programs, construction and auto trades predominate. There are many variations on the theme but carpentry, electrical wiring, heating and air conditioning, plumbing, painting and other home building trades are most common. In addition to preparation for a job in the outside world, one reason for this emphasis on building trades is that trained the inmates help maintain the correctional facility. Office practices, graphic arts and computer software classes are becoming more common in the technological age (without internet access). These benefit the institution as well as the inmate student.

Model 1. The traditional model for the 70s and 80s.

ABE, GED and vocational education = success.

Late 1980's - Early 1990's

Vendors began selling materials designed for the adult low reader in the late 1970s and 1980s. Series of materials dealing with finance, health, family and community topics were beginning to appear. Teachers were buying them, although many still relied on elementary

materials and tests. There was a debate about their relevance because the GED did not test reading in functional areas. In the late 1975 a landmark project, called The Adult Performance Level Project (APL), was launched and helped set the stage for a shift from academic achievement to functional competency testing and instruction (Northcutt, 1975). The new concept caused adult educators to take a serious look at the materials and tests they were using in the classroom. This important project continues to leave its mark on adult education today. The National Adult Learning Survey in the 1990s is based on a functional competency framework developed originally by at the University of Texas (Northcutt, 1975). The Comprehensive Adult Student Assessment System (CASAS) tools were also built on this new concept and, although much has changed since, the original APL framework is still apparent in the CASAS conceptual design (Rickard & Stiles, 1985). The five original areas: consumer economics, occupational knowledge, community resources, health, government and law are still at the core CASAS. Today, states such as Maryland, California and Oregon among many others have adopted CASAS performance level testing as the chief assessment device for adult instruction .

My experience over the last 15 years with the National Coalition for Literacy has afforded me an opportunity to watch trends among adult education associations. At coalition meetings adult educators have talked about how to encourage the business and labor community to work closely with them to train or retool adults for the workplace. Correctional educators have traditionally connected with the community through work release and job development programs. At the federal level there has been an increased emphasis on welfare reform and the movement of people from public assistance to the workforce. With the passage of the Workforce Investment Act (WIA), there has been more cooperation between adult education, welfare services and business and industry. The One Stop concept, one component of WIA, creates a framework for cooperation and creativity among many different agencies.

In correctional institutions, job fairs have become common and some businesses see prisons as a source of well-trained workers. Although many states stage job fairs for inmates nearing release, for a number of years the Federal Bureau of Prisons and the Texas Department of Corrections have been conducting job fairs to connect inmates with businesses in need of trained workers. The concept of literacy as functional has been enlarged to include, not only applied reading, writing and math, but also interpersonal skills for the workplace.

Model 2. The model for the late 1980s and early 1990s.

ABE (functional competency), GED, vocational education and job preparation = success.

Mid to Late 1990s

In the mid 1980s the National Institute for Corrections received a significant amount of funding from a great champion for correctional education, Senator Arlen Specter of Pennsylvania, to encourage improvements in correctional education. In one large grant, a national survey to locate best practices in adult correctional facilities was conducted by the Far West Laboratory (Making Literacy Programs Work, 1986). Numerous programs responded to a written survey and the best candidates were selected for site visits and evaluation. Ten model programs were chosen and described in this guide from the National Institute for Corrections.

The model literacy programs employed specialized reading and tutoring techniques to reach and teach the illiterate and reading disabled student. Some had adopted Literacy Volunteers of American or Laubach Literacy techniques and materials. Others, like the Maryland Correctional Education Program, adopted individualized reading techniques employed at Johns Hopkins and University of Maryland reading centers. All model programs used trained inmate tutors extensively. Inmates were being trained to tutor several hours per week in the prison schools. Often one teacher had ten or more tutors working in the classroom with as many students. Since tutoring was intensive, one tutor might work with two or three students a day, five days per week. The impact on educational achievement was tremendous. The number of illiterate students who could be accommodated based on their specific learning needs was much higher than in the traditional one teacher classroom.

Steurer and Tracy (1995), highlight many techniques used in several state correctional literacy programs. These are generally versions of multi-modality techniques developed over the years by reading researchers. They have not generally been part of the training of most elementary and secondary teachers, many of whom have become correctional teachers.

The use of inmate tutors caused a stir in corrections because it validated the value of trained inmates as paraprofessionals. In Maryland, two institutions were cited for their exemplary literacy programs, the Maryland Correctional Training Center and the Maryland Correctional Institution in Jessup (Making Literacy Programs Work, 1986). Within a few years most of the other Maryland programs developed tutor programs based on the model used at these two institutions. By the mid-1990's, I observed that it had become more acceptable for inmates to tutor other inmates; the use of inmate tutors was common.

Also during the mid-1990's, teachers became increasingly aware that many of their literacy students had significant learning disabilities (The Corrections Connection, 1993). This was corroborated by a growing number of studies of adults with disabilities both within and outside of prisons. The Corrections Connection study illustrates best practices in policy and procedure, identification, assessment, instruction and transition.

In the late 1990s, the National Institute for Literacy published Bridges to Practice: A research-based Guide for Literacy Practitioners Serving Adults with Learning Disabilities (see Taymans & Corley, this edition). Bridges is designed for adult educators in adult education systems. Teachers learn how to recognize the characteristics of individuals with learning disabilities and how to screen, test, make referrals, and create lessons. The Correctional Education Program in Maryland has trained 72 teachers to date. The Federal Bureau of Prisons and the Correctional Services of Canada have shown interest as well and provided Bridges training at the recent international Literacy 2000 Conference in Ottawa, Canada. Many states have instituted Special Education programs for juvenile as well as younger adult incarcerates under the federal IDEA regulations.

Model 3. One model for the mid to late 90s.

ABE (functional competency), GED, vocational education and job preparation enhanced by special reading techniques and inmate tutors = success.

Toward a Broader Model

A model outlined by CEA (Standards, 1997) established a broader view of literacy and adult education and includes: basic level education, secondary level education (GED or high school), career/technical education, cognitive education, post secondary education, transitional education, and specialized instruction in special education and learning disabilities. This comprehensive list of education program components was developed by a committee of correctional educators representing many states.

The National Institute for Literacy's Literacy Summit 2000 project and Equipped for the Future Content Standards publications also offer a broad conceptual framework that seeks to link adult literacy directly to the workplace, to family life and to participation in the community (Stein, 2000).

Over the past twenty-five years, we have seen a number of models for correctional education and adult literacy programs. What is the "right literacy model" for correctional education today? Basic literacy at the beginning of the 21st century starts with a high school diploma and job skills. Since the correctional student is not only a worker, but also a family member and a participant in the overall community, programs that help students re-establish and maintain healthy relationships should also be a part of the model. Because of the high prevalence of correctional students with learning disabilities, teachers need training to teach and accommodate students with various difficulties. Unfortunately correctional students are also criminal offenders and need help in reshaping the way they think about their own behavior. Thus a comprehensive model for correctional education - one that parallels the core components of adult literacy programs in the free community - is required.

Model 4. A current and evolving model.

ABE (functional competency) GED, vocational education and job preparation (transition education), parenting skills, cognitive training enhanced by special reading techniques and inmate tutors and accommodations for learning disabled students = success.

Conclusion

Models of correctional education and literacy will continue to develop. For example, public education's increasing emphasis on integrated instruction (academic and vocational) and standards for excellence will undoubtedly influence adult and correctional education. Computerized instruction holds promise for better instruction for illiterate and learning disabled students. The GED Testing Service completed a review of current high school practices in a recent publication, *Alignment of National and State Standards* (Woodward, 1999). As a result, the new GED 2002 will emphasize more performance and contextualized reading, writing and mathematics. Authentic documents used in the workplace and in every day situations will be used for instruction and testing. Students will be required to know how to use a calculator as part of the testing procedures. The recent growth of cognitive programs in Canada (see Fisher, this edition) and the United States raise important questions about how cognitive social skill programs relate to literacy.

It is clear that literacy no longer ends with a high school completion. Today's world demands postsecondary level skills for success. In a little more than a century our society has changed the definition of basic literacy from simple skills in math, reading and writing to a much more sophisticated and complicated concept.

These are some of the more obvious and current forces shaping the future of literacy and correctional education. As the model grows more comprehensive, teachers will need to be prepared to create more sophisticated methods of instruction in order to help students become successful citizens, parents and community members when they leave the correctional institutions.

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Bio:

Steve Steurer has been involved professionally with correctional education since 1973 when he began as a Reading consultant to the Maryland Division of Correction. Before that time he taught high school English, Reading, History and Italian in Chicago and Washington, D.C. for five years. Since becoming involved in corrections he has taken on various rolls which include: Title I resource teacher for the Division of Correction, Educational writer for various publishers, auditor for the American Correctional Association, Correctional Academic Coordinator for the Maryland State Department of Education, National Institute of Corrections IPA, President of the Maryland Association for Adult, Continuing and Community Education, Treasurer and Managing Director for the American Association for Adult and Continuing Education, and Executive Director of the international Correctional Education Association.

In recent years he has been involved with correctional education on the national level testifying before Congress on a number of occasions on the Adult Education, the Vocational Education and the Individuals with Disabilities Education Acts. Through the CEA he has hosted several national teleconferences and has spoken and conducted workshops at correctional and educational conferences and symposia in the United States, Canada, Europe and Japan, China and Australia. Finally, Steve has published scholarly articles in many journal and periodicals.