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Terra White

Learning Disabilities Among the Incarcerated

This essay examines the issue of learning disabilities among the incarcerated population. Studies show that approximately eleven percent of U.S. prison inmates self-report a learning disability, a rate nearly four times greater than that of the general U.S. population. The paper 1) addresses the obstacles in meeting this population's needs, and 2) argues for the importance of quality educational programming that includes services to those with learning disabilities both to improve rehabilitation for incarcerated individuals while imprisoned and to decrease recidivism upon release.

It is widely accepted that there is a strong correlation between an individual's education level and his or her likelihood to spend time in the United States' correctional system. In 1997, only 2.7 percent of state prison inmates held college or advanced degrees while 43.1 percent did not have a high school diploma or its equivalent (National Institute for Literacy 1). Study of learning disabilities in prison may help account for this disparity in educational experience. Learning disabilities (LD) severely inhibit many individuals, including a disproportionately large percentage of the prison population, from reaching a standard level of achievement.

My interest in the issue of learning disabilities among the incarcerated population came as the result of a personal experience. For the past two years, I have been a part of the Prison Outreach Program at Georgetown University. Prison Outreach is an undergraduate student volunteer program that works with incarcerated individuals at the Arlington County Detention Facility (ACDF) in Arlington, Virginia. Georgetown students provide one-on-one GED and ESL tutoring to inmates and serve as teaching assistants for a college-credit class taught at the facility by a Georgetown University professor.

It was through this program that I met Mr. Jones. Mr. Jones (a pseudonym) was preparing to take his General Educational Development (GED) test for the second time and had requested a tutor. At our first meeting, I could tell that Mr. Jones was a dedicated student. After brief introductions, he quickly set to work and remained on task for the duration of my visit. In the next few weeks, my initial belief was confirmed. Mr. Jones was consistently punctual and courteous; he worked hard both during our sessions and between them.

Despite his dedication and enthusiasm, I quickly saw that learning did not come easily to Mr. Jones, particularly in mathematics. We would spend a two-hour session mastering one specific concept, only to repeat the same lesson the next week. Mr. Jones could easily complete example problems, but often had great difficulty in deciding what concepts to apply when the choice was not obvious. Shortly after his second failed GED attempt, I spoke with the Education Coordinator at the facility about Mr. Jones' progress. She, too, was concerned. She was in the process of locating a licensed psychologist to test Mr. Jones for a learning disability.

I began to wonder how prevalent LD cases were among the incarcerated population. How, if at all, were learning disabilities being addressed within correctional education programs? How many other inmates also had learning disabilities, and how had these disabilities affected their lives, both prior to their imprisonment and while incarcerated?

Learning Disabilities in the General Population

The recognition and study of learning disabilities is a still relatively new phenomenon. In the United States, it was not until 1968 that LD was federally designated as a handicapping condition (Moats and Lyon 282). Since then, great advancements have been made in this area, as researchers and educators have grown increasingly aware of the causes and effects of various learning disabilities. Even so, a single, universally accepted definition of the term "learning disabilities" is still difficult to find, in part because there are many types of LD and these types manifest themselves differently among a wide variety of individuals.

According to "LDOnline," an internet resource for those affected by learning disabilities, specific learning disabilities can be divided into three major categories: developmental speech and language disorders, academic skills disorders, and other learning differences. Individuals diagnosed with LD may have one or a combination of these disorders. Developmental speech and language disorders are often the earliest indicators of a learning disability; those affected usually have difficulty producing speech sounds and using language to communicate. Academic skills disorders are those most commonly associated with the term "learning disability" by the general public. Dyslexia, perhaps the most well-known and best-understood learning disability, indicates a problem in any of the tasks involved in reading and affects between two and eight percent of school-age children. Other types of academic skills disorders include developmental writing disorder and developmental arithmetic disorder, also known as dyscalculia. Disorders falling into the third category, other learning differences, include motor skills disorders and other learning differences that do not meet the criteria for special learning disabilities ("Types of Learning Disabilities" 1).

Although not defined as learning disabilities, attention deficit disorder

(ADD) and attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) are closely related to LD; many individuals with ADD or ADHD also display symptoms for a specific learning disability (Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder 1). The most common manifestations of ADD/ ADHD are distractibility, impulsivity, and hyperactivity (Jaska 1).

Learning disabilities are lifelong problems that affect a large number of individuals from all walks of life. According to the results of the National Adult Literacy Survey (NALS) conducted by the U.S. Department of Education, approximately three percent of the general U.S. population self-reported having a learning disability (Haigler et al. xxiii). Approximately four to six percent of individuals in the general U.S. population have been diagnosed with ADD or ADHD (Jaska 1).

Because learning disabilities are manifested differently among individuals, adults with learning disabilities exhibit a wide array of primary characteristics, including difficulty in the following areas: concentrating in a noisy environment; reading comprehension; reading quickly; spelling; learning the rules of grammar; working math word problems; learning a foreign language; taking essay exams; and reading in front of a group (Lenz, Sturomski, and Corley; Vogel 14). However, it is important to note that individuals may exhibit difficulty in one of the areas while excelling in another. Learning disabilities expert Susan Vogel explains, "Areas of difficulty for some are areas of strength for others...LD are not a generalized problem of learning but are specific to certain domains" (14). Individuals with LD often exhibit a "jagged profile" of learning strengths and weaknesses.

Adults who have LD also experience a range of secondary issues associated with their learning differences. Negative experiences in educational settings often lead to feelings of low self-esteem and a lack of self-worth, especially in regard to an individual's academic skills. In addition, many adults with LD have difficulty in social situations and experience feelings of loneliness, isolation, and fear of intimacy. There are, however, also positive characteristics associated with adults who have LD, including resilience and creativity in adapting to their disability (Lenz, Sturomski, and Corley 7; Vogel 17).

Learning Disabilities among the Incarcerated Population

An examination of the general demographics of the prison population reveals several important differences between those incarcerated and the general population of the United States. The incarcerated population is largely male; men make up approximately 93 percent of prisoners (Facts about Prisons and Prisoners 1). Minorities are largely overrepresented in incarcerated population. In 2001, 46 percent of prisoners were black and 16 percent were Hispanic, although blacks make up less than 15 percent of the general population and

Hispanics make up approximately 12 percent (Walker, Spohn and DeLone 298-299). Prison inmates were often unemployed or underemployed prior to their arrest. In 1996, 36 percent of jail inmates were unemployed and 64 percent had monthly incomes under \$1000 prior to their arrest (Facts about Prisons and Prisoners 1).

There are also important differences between the incarcerated and general populations with regard to educational experiences. In 1997, 68 percent of prison inmates had not completed high school (Facts about Prisons and Prisoners). That same year, only 12.6 percent of 25 to 29 year olds in the general population did not have a high school diploma or its equivalent (U.S. Department of Education 1). Nearly seventy percent of prisoners scored in the two lowest levels on the National Adult Literacy Survey, compared with approximately fifty percent of the general population (Haigler et al. 19). In the words of John M. McKee and Carl B. Clements, two educators in Alabama's correctional system, "nearly all [the prisoners have] one characteristic in common: They were academic failures, many hopelessly so" (271). My own experience tutoring in a jail setting has confirmed this pattern to some extent; many inmates have had a largely negative experience in educational settings.

Among the prison population, the rate of learning disabilities is nearly four times higher than among the household population. While the prevalence of LD among the general U.S. population is approximately three percent, the National Adult Literacy Survey (NALS) found that eleven percent of prisoners self-reported having a learning disability. Even this statistic is likely to be a conservative measure of LD among this population, however, because the self-reports rely on inmates' awareness and admission of a learning disability. Many individuals, especially those who were in school before LD was federally recognized as a disorder, are unaware that their learning difficulties may be caused by a learning disability, while others may choose to avoid the stigma associated with identifying oneself as learning disabled. The NALS survey also examined the literacy skills of prisoners and the general population on three scales of literacy: prose literacy, document literacy, and quantitative literacy. Inmates with LD had markedly lower averages in all three scales than the prison population averages, especially on the quantitative literacy scale. The NALS reported that "these inmates scored at the very low end of the three literacy scales and their demonstrated proficiencies indicate that they are able to perform only the most basic literacy tasks" (Haigler et al. xxiii). In addition, those prison inmates who self-reported having a learning disability had significantly lower averages in all three literacy scales than those in the general population with LD (Haigler et al. 35). This is particularly interesting because prison inmates with other disabilities did not have significantly different literacy scores than their counterparts in the general population.

My interest in these issues led me to conduct a survey of inmates at ACDF to learn if these national patterns would be confirmed in my local setting.¹ A remarkable 113 of the 115 surveys I distributed were returned. Of those inmates surveyed, 12.4% self-reported that they had a learning disability. The most common specific LD named was dyslexia, although most who reported a learning disability could not identify a specific disorder. Inmates with LD were significantly (at the 95% confidence interval) less likely to have high school diplomas or to have passed the GED test. They also reported a lower self-rank in reading, writing, and math. 21.2% of those currently enrolled in educational programming at ACDF at the time of the survey self-reported a learning disability.

This disproportionately high rate of LD among prisoners raises two important questions. First, how, if at all, do learning disabilities affect the lives of individuals within the prison or jail setting? Second, what is being done and what can be done to best address learning disabilities within this setting?

Addressing Learning Disabilities in the Correctional Setting

In addition to analyzing the survey data, I conducted a series of five interviews with incarcerated individuals at ACDF to find out more about the effects of LD on the daily lives of inmates. All five of the interviewees were men, and all were enrolled in an Intensive Education (approximately equivalent to special education) course at the facility at the time of the interview. These men ranged in age from eighteen to forty-six years old; none had a high school diploma or its equivalent. All were recognized by both the Intensive Education teacher and the facility's Education Coordinator as learning disabled.

Some of those interviewed indicated that life in a jail facility is different for those with learning disabilities. One inmate indicated that those with LD become extremely reliant on the help of others, saying, "some people...when they aren't able to read something or understand something, they have to ask people for help." Assistance is needed especially in the case of legal documents which are common in this setting and often extremely important to the inmates' cases.

Learning disabilities may also affect the quality of daily life within the prison or jail setting. One interviewee explained that life was much different in jail for those living with a learning disability because

You can't write out to your family because you can't write or read. It makes the time much harder because you can't communicate with them. Imagine what you'd do [with your time] if you can't read a book or a magazine or write a letter. It'll make you...crazy, just sitting and doing nothing.

What, then, are the various components needed in an educational program to help learning disabled inmates achieve academic success? According to the

National Institute for Literacy's State Correctional Education Programs, "the first challenge for correctional education programs to successfully provide for inmates with learning disabilities...is to instill a belief in their instructors that these individuals learn differently than the general population" (Tolbert 16). Special education requires different teaching styles that place greater emphasis on remediation and repetition. In "Correctional Education: Selected Aspects," from the U.S. Department of Education's Clearinghouse on Adult Career and Vocational Education, the following six elements were found to be necessary in the implementation of quality correctional special education programs:

Development of procedures for assessing the skills and learning needs of LD offenders

- Implementation of a curriculum where functional academic, social, and daily living skills are taught

- Inclusion of vocational special education in the curriculum

- Presence of programs to help the LD offender to transition from correctional education programs to community programs upon release

- Existence of a comprehensive system for providing services to handicapped adult offenders

- Provision for special education training for correctional educators (Imel 2)

Addressing learning disabilities in any setting is a difficult task that requires much effort on the part of both students and teachers. This undertaking becomes even more complicated when placed within the constraints of the correctional setting. Several challenges must be overcome in order to provide quality educational programming to inmates with LD in the correctional setting. Some of these challenges are related generally to correctional education and some are specific to the issue of learning disabilities.

Educational programs face many obstacles in secure correctional facilities. On some level, there is an inherent conflict between the philosophy of incarceration and the philosophy of education. The goal of education, a free-thinking mind, encounters opposition in a setting where basic freedoms have been stripped away.

Other obstacles are less abstract. Within prisons and jails, security is the first concern, education a much lower priority. Funding and resources for education are often scarce, leading to inadequate supplies and programming. Correctional educators are overworked and often enter the prison or jail setting with little preparation specifically focused on the needs of incarcerated learners. These educators must then contend with constraints unique to the correctional setting: interruptions from lock downs, head counts, lawyer visits, and court dates that cut into valuable class time; facility restrictions that limit the materi-

als that can be used; and a lack of support from correctional staff who view the role of educators as secondary and inconsequential (Kerka 2).

Teaching incarcerated students with learning disabilities poses additional challenges. Many correctional education programs, due to time and budget constraints, take on a format that is not particularly effective for LD learners. Most programs allow students to work independently, using prepared study materials; the teacher acts as a facilitator, and the students ask the teachers questions only when they have difficulty mastering a concept. Students with LD, however, have great difficulty learning this way. Research indicates that “individuals with LD acquire literacy skills more efficiently (better and faster) when the teacher takes an active, direct, and explicit approach to teaching basic literacy skills” (Lenz, Sturmski, and Corley 30). In a correctional setting, where resources are scarce and students have large differences in skill level, it is extremely difficult for educators to provide this kind of instruction.

Despite these limitations, there are compelling reasons to provide quality education that properly addresses the needs of LD learners to this population. “Correctional education programs hold the promise of addressing the poor education and literacy skills of a significant percentage of individuals, particularly young, black, and Hispanic adult males” (LoBuglio 1). Prisons and jails have the unique opportunity to reach a generally undereducated and underserved population. In addition, for many inmates “there is a release from the pressures of everyday survival, abusive relationships, family responsibilities, and drug addiction” upon entering prison (Boudin 211). For some inmate, Imprisonment provides the first opportunity to pursue an education without the distractions and stresses of daily life. It is important that correctional systems be provided with adequate funding to provide quality educational programming, which must incorporate research and information on learning disabilities, to meet this need and capitalize on this opportunity.

The public is generally unsupportive of much spending on correctional education. There are, however, important reasons for public support of education for incarcerated offenders. Correctional education has been proven to reduce recidivism rates among offenders. The “Three State Recidivism Study” conducted by the Correctional Education Association with a grant from the U.S. Department of Education found participation in correctional education programs reduced the probability of re-incarceration by 29 percent (Steuerer et al. 49). In addition,

By improving the opportunity for these individuals to secure and retain employment in better-paying jobs, society could reap huge long-term benefits in terms of greater family stability, lower rates of child poverty, reduced welfare payments, lowered crime rates, improved civic life, along with many social indicators of well-being. (LoBuglio 1)

Correctional education ends up paying for itself and saving the public more money than is spent to provide programming. Besides these monetary benefits, there is another compelling reason to support the education of offenders. The vast majority of those currently incarcerated will eventually be released back into the communities where we all live.

Conclusion

Compared to many inmates in similar situations, Mr. Jones was quite lucky. Eventually, the Education Coordinator was able to locate a psychologist who was not only willing to offer his diagnosis at a discounted rate, but also to enter a jail to complete his assessment. Our suspicions were confirmed; Mr. Jones did, in fact, have a learning disability. Diagnosis of this disability allowed both the Education Coordinator and me to better assist Mr. Jones in achieving his academic goals. In addition, with proper documentation of his disability, Mr. Jones was able to request special accommodations for his next GED test. With these accommodations, he passed the test, impressively improving his score in the mathematics section from a 390 to 470.

The educational opportunities available to Mr. Jones and other inmates at ACDF are impressive and owed largely to a progressive philosophy within the jail administration and incredible dedication on the part of the Education staff. Unfortunately, ACDF is the exception rather than the rule. A large number of prisons and jails in the United States have poor and often deteriorating educational services. Between 1991 and 1997, the proportion of soon-to-be-released inmates who participated in education programs dropped from 43 to 35 percent. In most cases, this decline was a result of decreased programming and funding, not a lack of interest. Prisons and jails have a unique opportunity to provide education to a significant number of adult learners, many of whom have learning disabilities. It is important to seize this opportunity.

Additional Information

The following websites provide excellent information about learning disabilities and LD among the incarcerated population:

Correctional Education Association (www.ceanational.org)

National Institute for Literacy (www.nifl.gov)

Correctional Education LINC'S Special Collection
(http://www.easternlincs.org/correctional_education/)

Three State Recidivism Study (www.ceanational.org/documents/3StateFinal.pdf)

LD Online (www.ldonline.org)

Note

1. Georgetown University IRB Number: 03-066C; approved June 24, 2003.

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Terra White is a junior at Georgetown University, majoring in English and Sociology. For the past three years, she has worked with Georgetown's Prison Outreach volunteer program. She studied the issue of learning disabilities among the incarcerated population in the summer of 2003 through a research fellowship through Georgetown's John Carroll Scholars.