



International Literacy Day – 8 September 2022

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In a post-Covid 19 world that is still making sense of how to move forward whilst still dealing with the direct and indirect ramifications of the ongoing virus, the residual impact upon incarcerated populations seems to have been lost in the conversation. Two and a half years have passed since Covid-19 first forced our prisons to operate under lockdown restrictions and learners both in prison and in the community faced immense educational challenges when pandemic-related restrictions to movement and activities were introduced to curb the spread of the virus. Yet despite education provision in the community returning (more or less) to pre-Covid ways of operating, the return to a 'normal' prison education curriculum remains slow-moving¹. In April of 2022, Ofsted released the results of a 2021 study entitled *Education Recovery in Prisons* which aimed to investigate the ways in which prisons in England and Wales are progressing through reinstating education in prisons to its full capacity. The report identified the issues that remain in prisons with respect to the provision of education, work, and skills, noting that as of March 2022, the delivery of prison education had still not been made a priority in the wake of Covid-19 restrictions to prison-based activities.¹ The authors of the report acknowledged that staffing issues remain prominent in prisons, resulting in difficulties in providing the necessary educational support to prison learners.

Although we are now in a phase of post-Covid-19 lockdowns, prisoners are still spending excessive amounts of time in their cells, with detrimental effects to their health and wellbeing². Disproportionate amounts of time where prisoners are confined to their cells can limit their ability to engage in activities (such as education) that are necessary for their personal development and rehabilitation². In their joint report *Prison education: a review of reading education in prison* (2022), Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Prisons (HMIP) and Ofsted noted that for those incarcerated, learning even the most basic literacy skills that many of us in the community might take for granted is critical to personal growth and the ability to navigate both prison life and the post-prison experience³. Research in the US has shown that 17% of inmates who receive literacy help will go back to prison after release, as opposed to 70% of those who do not receive literacy help⁴. When visits were halted in prisons at the height of Covid-19 restrictions, those prisoners who could not correspond with family and

¹ Ofsted. (2022, April 4). *Education recovery in prisons*. <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/education-recovery-in-prisons/education-recovery-in-prisons#the-current-state-of-prison-education>

² HM Inspectorate of Prisons. (2021, February). *What happens to prisoners during a pandemic? A thematic review by HM Inspectorate of Prisons*. <https://www.justiceinspectors.gov.uk/hmiprison/wp-content/uploads/sites/6/2021/02/What-happens-to-prisoners-in-a-pandemic.pdf>

³ HM Inspectorate of Prisons & Ofsted. (2022, March 22). *Prison education: a review of reading education in prisons*. <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/prison-education-a-review-of-reading-education-in-prisons/prison-education-a-review-of-reading-education-in-prisons#fn:4>

⁴ Kirkland. (2019). The truth behind the pipeline: Is the illiteracy-to-prison connection real? *Literacy Today*, 36(4), 10.



friends due to being unable to read or write were of course disproportionately impacted, particularly when considering that the only other method of communication for prisoners during Covid-19 was the video communication platform *Purple Visits*, the implementation of which has been plagued by inconsistencies in provision and technological challenges across the prison estate⁵.

Given the limited out-of-cell time prisoners have been given during and in the aftermath of Covid-19 restrictions, carving out time to learn to read can be a significant challenge for prison learners.³ Particularly for those prisoners who struggle the most with learning to read and thus require in-person or one-on-one instruction, a lack of out-of-cell time to focus on learning literacy skills and an environment that does not support or advocate for basic literacy education can lead to individuals who are drastically unprepared for prison and post-prison life.

Returning to their review of reading education in prison, HMIP and Ofsted recently found that prisoners are leaving prison without learning or improving upon basic reading skills.**Error! Bookmark not defined.** In the target-driven environment of prison education, this report acknowledges that attending to the reading needs of prisoners and teaching prison learners basic reading skills are not being prioritised by prison and education leaders. Additionally, it is noted that the structure of prison education encourages educators to focus more on ensuring learners receive their required English functional skills qualifications than on educating them in the basics of reading**Error! Bookmark not defined.**

Prisoners' inability to read can impact every aspect of their lives in prison such as corresponding with loved ones, participating in rehabilitative activities, and understanding important prison regime information⁶. Illiteracy can have knock-on effects post-release for prisoners as being unable to read can impact employability and the ability to desist from criminal activity**Error! Bookmark not defined.** With literacy levels in prison being notoriously low, particularly when compared to the general population⁶, the provision of a prison regime that prioritises basic reading skills must be a matter of utmost importance for prison leaders who have the capability and responsibility of ensuring that incarcerated individuals are given the necessary tools to endure life both in prison and after release.

⁵ Coomber, A. (2022, April 22). The impact of restrictions on visits during the pandemic. *Howard League for Penal Reform*. <https://howardleague.org/blog/the-impact-of-restrictions-on-visits-during-the-pandemic/>

⁶ HM Inspectorate of Prisons & Ofsted. (2022, March 22). *Prison education: a review of reading education in prisons*. <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/prison-education-a-review-of-reading-education-in-prisons/prison-education-a-review-of-reading-education-in-prisons#fn:4>