

MARCH • 2003

VOLUME 46 NO 6

ISSN 1081-3004

# JOURNAL OF Adolescent & Adult Literacy

International Reading Association

Life and literacy:  
Struggling readers in prison

The power of words

Linking science and literature

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# Turning a New Page to life and literacy

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## A literacy intervention program finds success among struggling readers in prison.

"I never read a novel before. Now it is easy for me," said one of the inmates in the Westmorland Institution in Dorchester, New Brunswick, Canada. Supporting older nonreaders in the struggle for literacy is probably nowhere more challenging than in a correctional facility. In Canada almost half of the adult population reads below the sixth-grade level, and many inmates read below that. Those of us who work with reluctant students know that the relationship between literacy and behavior begins early in their lives, yet intervention can be successful (Taylor, Hasselbring, & Williams, 2001). Data support the value of literacy intervention for the older, struggling reader in secondary schools, and we found that these same components, with appropriate modifications, were successful for the inmates. According to their warden, the inmates' only hope of success upon release from prison would be their ability to use literacy skills to become givers in society—not takers.

Turning a New Page is an unconventional literacy project that develops vocabulary, comprehension, fluency, and self-esteem in the older, reluctant reader. Begun in June 2000, it holds the promise of a better life for inmates, and we believe the program can be applied to other older, struggling readers. Initially, Rick McAtee (second

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author) was asked to give a reading workshop at the prison. As a result, he was invited to speak at Literacy 2000 Towards Reintegration, an international conference for prison employees. During this conference he discussed the relationship between self-esteem, behavior, and lack of literacy skills. Following the presentation, Rick selected the Westmorland Institution as the pilot site for the Turning a New Page project. As a result of the success of Turning a New Page and expanded interest in the field, Rick now devotes the majority of his time to directing the project.

## What is unique about Turning a New Page?

The project originated with the concept that older reluctant learners (adolescents and adults) need to feel empowered and respected in their quest for literacy. As we discovered while developing, implementing, and evaluating programs for such students, motivation to read is an integral component of reengaging the older, reluctant reader and must be built into any intervention for them (Allen, 1995; Blasewitz & Taylor, 1999; Hasselbring, Goin, Bottge, Taylor, & Daley, 1997; Taylor et al., 2001). As older students receive the necessary explicit instruction on vocabulary and comprehension strategies, they must also read independently at their appropriate level to build fluency.

## **Motivation to read**

Addressing the literacy needs of vocabulary, comprehension, and fluency is not enough. Older students also need motivation to partake in the risky process of reading (where they previously were unsuccessful). This motivation is achieved (Jensen, 1998) when the environment is psychologically and academically safe, when choice is provided, and when clear achievable goals are present—as in the components of Turning a New Page. Formerly unsuccessful students must be assured that they are in a respectful environment to develop literacy skills. Their self-concept as learners is intertwined with their perceived ability to comprehend printed words. The goal is to build fluency and confidence as independent readers so they will continue to read (practice) and get better as they leave the institution and become life-long learners.

Prison inmates are motivated to participate in the Turning a New Page program by their contributions to the literacy of young children in schools in the surrounding community. They make audiotapes of children's books for use in the schools. This is a clear, achievable goal, which is academically safe (on their independent reading level) and psychologically safe (they choose what to do). The audiotapes motivate the inmates to read books of their choice repeatedly, which builds fluency. One inmate validated the concept in his own words: "Recording the stories makes me feel like a productive member of society." He added, "I never had no one to help me, to sit down and read a book and show me what the pictures mean. I don't want other children to turn around and do what I did. Jail isn't a place for anybody."

## **Developing a positive attitude**

Students need to develop a positive attitude toward reading to motivate them to read more challenging material. Older reluctant or struggling readers generally have a negative attitude toward reading, read less frequently, and conse-

quently fall further behind their peers. "A positive attitude towards reading, although not associated with higher performance in beginning reading, may sustain an interest in reading through upper grades" (Snow, Burns, & Griffin, 1998, p. 206). When inmates have reading selections matched to their independent reading levels, they experience success and begin to feel positive about reading. For the inmates, the making of audiotapes for children in school improved their self-esteem related to the task of reading and sustained their interest.

## **Explicit instruction**

With an interest developed and practice in reading taking place, the inmates became more willing to allow their teacher to provide explicit instruction. During classroom instruction the inmates knew the phonetic rules and the sound-symbol relationships, although they could not apply them when reading. They worked on the patterns of words and sentences to develop confidence and knowledge of how text is written and, hence, became better readers and writers.

Instruction on metacognitive comprehension strategies and vocabulary development was also included in the classroom time. According to Snow et al. (1998), mature readers construct meaning on two levels, the literal understanding and the connection to the world beyond the text. With older, struggling readers it is necessary to have them practice building fluency on their independent reading level while providing instructional experiences with developmentally appropriate text for their interest and age.

The inmates' teacher tried diligently for years to make progress with literacy but met with resistance until she implemented Turning a New Page. The major difference between her past literacy instruction and Turning a New Page was the inmates' selection of books at their independent reading levels, which could be read and reread until "perfect" for taping. Rereading built fluency on common words that previously impeded the

success of inmates and caused them to become frustrated and quit trying to read. Motivated by a feeling of significance, the inmates were willing to participate more fully in classroom instruction, and they were soon complaining that they didn't have enough time to read. When one inmate was complimented on his improvement, he thought the pleasure would be taken away: "You mean I can't read anymore?" Now the most resistant students are the most successful and enthusiastic readers in class.

### **Rereading to develop fluency**

In addition to receiving classroom instruction, the inmates select a children's book on their independent reading level as measured by the Scholastic Reading Inventory (SRI), a quick classroom reading comprehension assessment that provides a lexile score and grade-level equivalent. Their reading levels are often as low as first grade. Without the motivation to produce audiobooks for young children, these inmates would not normally read children's books. They each read and reread their selection until they can read it fluently with expression. Some of the books chosen by the inmates have been *The Stinky Cheese Man and Other Fairly Stupid Tales* (Jon Sieszka, 1992, Scholastic); *Frog Went a-Courtin'* (John Langstaff, 1955, Scholastic); *Best Friends Wear Pink Tutus* (Sheri Brownrigg, 1993, Scholastic); *Huggly Takes a Bath* (Tedd Arnold, 1998, Scholastic); and *The Legend of Bluebonnet* (Tomie dePaola, 1983, Putnam). When an inmate records an audiotape of a children's book, he first introduces himself with a simple "Hi, I'm [first name] and I'm going to read *Monkey See, Monkey Do*" (Marc Gave, 1993, Scholastic).

Sometimes it takes as many as 80 readings for an inmate to tape a children's book fluently. This component is supported by Snow et al. (1998). "Adequate progress in learning to read English (or any alphabetic language) beyond an initial level depends upon sufficient practice in reading to achieve fluency with different kinds of text" (pp. 3-4). Fluent pronunciation is not

enough; the recordings must also be made with enthusiasm and expression. The inmates were resistant at first and thought the error-free reading was too hard, but now they are picky—they have so much pride in their accomplishments. Each tape is recorded on one side with page breaks and on the other side without them for flexible use with elementary children. So far more than 200 titles have been recorded.

After the recordings are made, the books and tapes are distributed to the local school district, which then distributes them to the volunteer teachers in kindergarten through fifth grade. These teachers use the tapes in listening centers, particularly with reluctant readers who need audio support, as models for acquiring the skills of good readers. After four weeks, the books and tapes are returned to the prison for repairs and then redistributed. Between June 2000 and June 2001, more than 1,600 children and 56 teachers in 20 elementary schools had access to and benefited from these free literacy resources.

### **What are the results for the inmates?**

Success for the 65 inmates who have participated in the program thus far has been measured in a number of ways. The first, of course, is in reading. At the beginning of the program the inmates' reading levels are measured on the Canadian Adult Achievement Test to determine placement. Then they take the Scholastic Reading Inventory, which they take again at the end of the first 12 months. The SRI provides a pre- and postgrade level reading equivalent measure. It also provides a lexile score for matching the inmates to books at their appropriate independent reading level. A lexile score is a numerical range (related to reading levels) that a student gets from taking the SRI which corresponds to lexile levels assigned to books. It assists teachers in guiding students to books that can be read without frustration. In one calendar year the mean growth in reading as measured by the SRI was 2.6 years, and some

inmates experienced as much improvement as 3 to 4 years.

Other results are a little more difficult to quantify but may be even more important. Inmate participants have improved their confidence and attitude according to their teachers and the warden. At first they walked around hiding books under their jackets; now they walk with them out in the open. One 60-year-old inmate, who was virtually a nonreader and not eligible for parole, had such an attitude adjustment that he now is reading at the fourth-grade level. He was so motivated to read for children that he took other steps toward rehabilitation and was eventually paroled. Another inmate believed that the project gave an opportunity to him and to the children learning to read. Now he could “connect” with his own children. “They haven’t seen me for a while. I can read to my children through tapes,” he said. Turning a New Page allowed him a sense of parenting and “connecting” with a potential life outside prison.

Even family members, who only have written communication with the inmates, have observed changes. Spouses said that they had seen a marked improvement in the written letters they received. One wife asked her husband, “Who is writing these letters for you?” Writing is not the focus of Turning a New Page, but these spousal comments support the relationship between reading and writing. Regularly reading well-written texts helps writers improve their craft, even if the improvement takes place on an unconscious level.

The ultimate measure of success for an inmate is whether he can be successful in life on the outside. Of the 65 inmates who participated over two years, 42 were actively in the reading class. The other 23 voluntarily participated in the rereading and recording, but they were not allowed to be in the classroom due to constraints related to their offenses. For those 42 who actively participated in the program and have been released, only 4 have returned so far for parole violations (e.g., consuming alcohol) but not for new

crimes. The Canadian national average for return to prison is 43%, and, although it’s too early to draw conclusions, the return rate for Turning a New Page participants is about 13%. Six inmates remain in prison and active, and another 6 have transferred within the system. The results have been recognized to the point that the National Prison Board has nominated Turning a New Page for recognition as the most successful program for parole and reintegration.

## Is the idea too controversial for schools?

At first, school personnel were hesitant to participate in the program. Administrators were concerned that there might be interaction between the inmates and children. Once they were assured that the only interaction would be a recorded voice on a tape, teachers were allowed to volunteer to use the audiobooks. Schools who have participated in the program shared the information regarding the source of the free audiobooks with their parent advisory committees to be sure they knew of the project.

So far, there have been no negative effects or concerns. In fact, the participating teachers who responded to an exit survey said how much they appreciated the resources. Exit surveys (see Figure) were distributed to 72 teachers, and 56 surveys were returned. Most participants used the audiobooks in their listening centers and for guided reading. In an elementary classroom there is never “enough teacher to go around,” but these audiobooks provide needed oral support for students to develop vocabulary, phonological awareness, and fluency.

Here is a representative sample of the comments on the exit survey.

- The materials are beneficial to all students.
- The students loved the books and tapes!
- The at-risk readers used them most often and took them home.

## Turning a New Page literacy project exit survey

Teacher's name: \_\_\_\_\_ School: \_\_\_\_\_ Grade: \_\_\_\_\_

1. List the reading levels in your class.
2. Was the material effective in dealing with different learning styles?
3. What was the project's biggest asset?
4. What issues need to be addressed?
5. How did the students feel about the materials?
6. Did students comment on the materials coming from a prison?
7. In what way did you use the materials in your classroom?
8. What worked best?
9. Were the materials beneficial for at-risk readers? In what way?
10. What would make the product more suitable for at-risk readers?
11. Make one or two comments to share with the group.

- Excellent quality control—wonderful choice of books. Keep up the good work!
- Students loved them [audiobooks] and looked forward to them coming.
- It is free—a real boon to schools with small budgets.

### What can we learn from Turning a New Page?

As Allen's (1995) book title suggests, *It's Never Too Late*. Canadian schools have been committed to the teaching of reading in elementary schools, but now a great number of former students are in Canadian prisons. We have found that with creative, research-based programs like Turning a New Page we can support all learners, regardless of age or situation, in their need for literacy development.

Older, reluctant readers need motivation and respect in learning environments that are safe psychologically and academically and provide choice and clear, achievable goals. These requirements are necessary for continued literacy devel-

opment in middle schools, high schools, and beyond. Literacy skills are transferable from one setting to another, one school to another, and from inside prison to the outside world. In fact, many of the approaches that we use, like Turning a New Page, are virtually free and can assist more than one target population without increased demands on scarce resources.

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