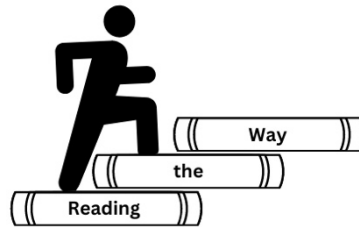
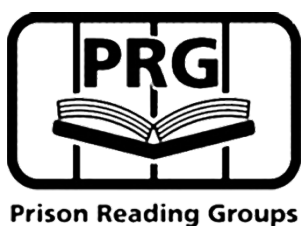


Reading the Way



**Report on a pilot project for emergent readers at
HMPs Liverpool and Thameside
July 2023**



Prison Reading Groups

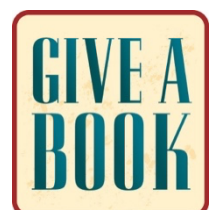


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Background

In March 2022, Ofsted/HM Inspectorate of Prisons published *Prison education: a review of reading education in prisons* (Ofsted/HMIP, 2022). This report stressed the need for more attention to developing reading in prisons, emphasising a perceived lack of focus on supporting prisoners' abilities in decoding and the need for more phonics-based approaches. However, while this report also mentions the importance of reading for pleasure, it provides little direction in how to foster it, particularly for those learning to read. Furthermore, it devotes little attention to the crucial relationship between enjoyment and the development of reading skills. The follow up report, published on June 30, 2023 (Ofsted/HMIP, 2023), concluded that limited progress has been made overall.

Our response

The 2022 report also emphasised the need for partnership working to support reading development. In response, Prison Reading Groups¹ (PRG), which has been working in prisons for over twenty years, brought together a team to create reading groups that would enable emergent readers to practise and enjoy reading and thereby develop confidence and competence. The team included PRG, adult literacy specialists from ccConsultancy² and UCL Institute of Education³, and literacy tutors from Novus⁴, one of the main prison education providers. There was additional support from prison libraries and Shannon Trust⁵.

Reading groups are very popular in prisons but we knew that most existing groups were unlikely to appeal to emergent readers who feel they cannot read and/or struggle with reading. We therefore developed two pilot reading groups specifically aimed at emergent readers, at HMPs Thameside and Liverpool, with an emphasis on discussion and shared interests. This report summarises our findings from this pilot.

What is an emergent reader?

The term 'emergent reader' is preferable to 'beginner reader' as it acknowledges that all adults living in literate societies have some knowledge of reading and writing and are rarely at the very beginning of a learning-to-read journey. Further, the term 'emergent' carries with it a recognition of the range of barriers experienced by those who feel they cannot read or can read very little, as well as the complexity of the relationships between past

¹ <https://prisonreadinggroups.org.uk/>

² <https://ccpathways.co.uk>

³ <https://www.ucl.ac.uk/ioe/>

⁴ <https://www.novus.ac.uk>

⁵ <https://www.shannontrust.org.uk/>

experiences, confidence and the ability to read a particular text on a particular occasion (see, for example, Mace, 1992; Schwab, 2010).

The above-mentioned 2022 Ofsted/HMIP report highlights the limitations of using prisons' initial assessment information as an indication of emergent reading skills: "The English assessment that all prisoners take when they first enter a prison...is not intended to assess whether or how well the prisoner can read. The assessment does not give leaders or teachers information on which prisoners struggle with reading or on the precise knowledge and skills gaps that might limit their reading ability." The report further notes: "Many prisoners have poor reading skills, and the gaps in knowledge and skills could be very different from one person to another. The assessments failed to unpick these differences."

It is not only prison-mandated initial assessments that do not always give a true picture of someone's reading confidence, competence and experience. Neither do 'levels' associated with formal education provision (ccConsultancy/ETF, 2018). Additionally, those who feel they cannot read may actually have significant existing reading skills (for example, some knowledge of sound-symbol relationships or awareness of the layout of a formal letter). It is therefore crucial to understand the impact of an individual's reading confidence and self-image. An emergent readers' group is most usefully understood as a group for people who feel they cannot read or can read very little ('I am not a reader') and would like to practise in a supportive environment.

What are reading groups and what do they do?

Reading groups meet all over the world and seem to have existed for as long as people have been reading. The vast majority of reading groups are informal arrangements set up by their members; while practice varies, a common pattern is for groups to discuss books, building interpretations together in conversation, and link these discussions to participants' own life experiences. Some groups discuss books they have each read individually (prior to the meeting); others read texts together when they meet. A unifying factor is their collaborative, non-hierarchical structure and the importance of discussion and refreshments (see for example, Hartley, 2002; 2020; Hartley and Turvey, 2009; Long, 2003; Duncan, 2012; 2014). Of particular significance for emergent readers, reading groups can offer opportunities for vital peer-teaching in the form of exchange of expertise; as, for example, Participant A supports Participant B with decoding a word, and B in turn provides a valuable account of character motivation or knowledge of the real-life contexts of the book (Duncan, 2012).

What we planned

We planned two pilot groups, one at HMP Thameside and one at HMP Liverpool, both targeted at emergent readers and each running for five weekly sessions of around 90

minutes. They were facilitated by a team of two or three from our planning group, including at least one person who regularly works within the prison and one adult literacy expert. The choice of venue within each prison depended on the local situation, with one group held in the library and the other in a rearranged classroom. We selected a story ('My Polish Teacher's Tie' by Helen Dunmore) to break into five short chunks to read gradually over the five-week period. We supplemented this continuous text with short, varied texts to explore themes and ideas raised by discussions of the story and, crucially, participants' interests. We planned to start each pilot group with reflections on the nature of reading and reading experiences, and to start every session with refreshments. Participants would be invited to read aloud during the sessions but also assured that it was fine to listen, follow along in the text and participate through discussion. We felt it was particularly important to spend time talking about how this reading group would be a space where we support each other, and to agree 'ways of working'. For example, agreeing to take turns in reading and say 'pass' if we wanted to decline reading aloud; the importance of listening to people when they're reading, and deciding when and how we might interrupt, help or join in if somebody was struggling with a word. We planned to devote time regularly in the sessions and between them to reflections and feedback from participants and facilitators.

Recruitment

A key aim identified by the planning team was that this pilot should not be positioned as 'education' but rather as a discussion-based reading group for enjoyment, and members should be invited through one-to-one conversations. This was partly due to the target audience of emergent readers (those who feel they cannot read or can read very little): the option of making posters for people to read and sign up was potentially inappropriate here. We also recognised that if someone does not have experience of a reading group, then it is hard to express this succinctly on a poster or flyer. Furthermore, we understood the need for recruiters to have situated knowledge of the prison, for example, education staff working on the wings, library staff and Shannon Trust mentors⁶. Some group members were also identified during prison inductions and as time went on it became clear that group members were 'selling' the benefits of being part of the group to other people on their wings and so future groups might include people who self-elected to join. We aimed to recruit eight prisoners for each group and recognised that not everyone may be able to come every week.

⁶ To provide an example, a team member within one of our pilot prisons sent us these profiles of the men recruited to the reading group: A) Gets overwhelmed with large amounts of text. Can't read books. Gets nervous and has panic attacks. B) Dyslexic using green overlays. He doesn't read a lot but would like to. Finds it hard to remember what he's read. C) Has a very short attention span. Can't concentrate for long enough to read more than a few lines. D) Lacks confidence but really wants to improve. E) Reads very slowly which affects his confidence. F) Rushes when he reads and misses bits out. Lacks confidence.

How the groups started, and how they evolved

We started the first session offering group members inexpensive reading glasses of various strengths, pens and notebooks (for the group members to use however they liked), as well as starting each session with tea, coffee and nicer-than-your-average-biscuits. This had not been a large part of our planning process but turned out to be crucial to ‘kicking things off’ in a supportive and friendly way.

During the first sessions we quickly discovered that the planning we had done was useful insofar as we had a story to follow across the five weeks and ideas about how to agree ‘working approaches’ and ensure that everyone felt empowered to shape the content. But the reality was much more organic, as is the case for most reading groups. The usual pattern each week involved a greeting and welcome, refreshments and seeing how everyone was, followed by a recap of what we remembered about the story so far. We then read the next section of the story aloud (taking turns as desired) and had a discussion about what we had read, what struck us, what might happen next etc., followed by reading and discussing some other texts. The group members shared topics they found interesting and text types they wanted to read, and each week the facilitators brought in materials based on these suggestions (for example, song lyrics from favourite songs, recipes for popular dishes and letters from admired activists or politicians). As the weeks went on, we as facilitators said less and the other group members spoke more.

From the beginning, some group members were keen to read parts of the texts aloud. As the weeks went on, everyone wanted to read aloud, and did. As facilitators, we noticed early on that some group members had solid phonic decoding skills, that is, they could ‘sound-out’ and verbalise most of the words in the text. But we also noticed that sometimes those more confident with word-level reading had trouble remembering what they had read or building up meaning presented over a paragraph or two. Others were stronger at understanding the meaning being built up, but read much more slowly, struggling with fluency. This was a lesson in the range of strengths and needs in a group who all feel they ‘cannot read’ or ‘cannot read much’, and who, following from shared experience of being stigmatised as ‘slow’ or ‘stupid,’ wanted to read in a ‘safe’ and supportive group.

What the group members thought

During the ongoing discussions and in the final meeting, group members highlighted enjoyment, purpose, community and growing mastery of reading. They also had ideas for the future running of similar groups. They enjoyed listening to others reading aloud and commented that “It was like a live podcast” and “I like listening to how everyone says it differently”. They said that the group “made reading fun.” It was also clear that the group

was a place that allowed members to escape their situation with clear purpose for a short time: “There’s not much I look forward to but I look forward to this.” “It gets you out of the jail for a bit,” or “stops me messing about on the wing.” For people who are used to being told when to get up, what to eat, when to get a shower and what to do, being able to choose what to read and what to talk about allowed a level of autonomy and independence rarely experienced.

Members also commented on the reading group as a community, on how accepted and comfortable they felt as part of the group: “You’ve made me feel really welcome” and “I don’t like to read aloud because of my strong accent and people not understanding me, but it hasn’t been like that in these sessions”. Highlighting the importance of groups not being promoted as ‘education’, participants commented on the discussions and collaborative feel: “It’s not the same as doing it in class. I like having a chat with people in the group. It’s different.” “I liked the social aspect. We’d never have met on the outside.” “We talk about the group on the wing and it’s like friends.” The group members noted that features like the refreshments and the offer of reading glasses (and in some cases, coloured overlays) contributed to this feeling of being “welcomed,” and also how important it was that both facilitators and members were friendly and encouraging, so “no one is putting anyone else down.”

Members also explained that if you hear someone else struggling to read a word, it “makes you feel more like you belong”, that “this is a group for you” and “you are all in the same position,” “I felt comfortable with the group and happy to join in the conversations.” Crucially, this sense of belonging and community, and the weekly practice, provided the opportunity to “feel more like someone who can read.” One man noted “I’m much more confident reading in front of others, and this could help me, maybe in a job interview.”

There was strong agreement that the programme should last longer than five weeks. “I can’t believe it’s the fifth week. It’s gone quick!” “I’m going to miss this. It’s a shame it’s not going on for 10 weeks.” However, it was also acknowledged that a longer commitment from the beginning might be off-putting so it would be better to start with five or six weeks and extend if members agreed. There were mixed views about reading one longer story over a series of weeks, with some noting that this might be off-putting, while others liked the idea of gradually working through a longer text together. One person suggested that two stories may be better. They were unanimous, though, in the importance of choice, not only choosing the shorter texts but also reading blurbs to choose the longer text together. The value of having physical texts as handouts to take back to the cell, reread and share was confirmed by a suggestion to have more texts to take away with them, perhaps one story to read together and others to read alone.

Finally, when we asked the group about the qualities or experience needed by the facilitators, the first and resounding response was that the facilitators need to be “intrigued by reading and stories” (as well as being “down to earth” and “not judging”).

Facilitator evaluation

As the weeks went on, it was clear that the ownership of the group had shifted to the participants. They increasingly led discussions and decided when, for example, we might move on to reading a different text. We were also aware that the participants were developing confidence: in us, in each other, in reading and in discussion. In turn, we were developing our knowledge of the group members, their interests and what they found more and less challenging. We observed how reading aloud and listening to others developed confidence in decoding and fluency, and members were more confident in making inferences.

We observed how each group discussed a variety of important, and intellectually stimulating subjects. One example from the Liverpool group was reading a letter from Alan Turing to his friend shortly before he killed himself. The group talked about the historical law criminalising gay people – we then linked to poems written by people in prison and how our notions of what is classed as a crime can change over time. The Thameside group read song lyrics from Bob Marley, Deacon Blue and Jimmy Cliff which led to discussions about standing up to forms of oppression, as well as poems and recipes which led to the sharing of expertise on cooking and fishing. These conversations involved the group members sharing their own distinct experiences and expertise, while highlighting what they have in common.

Group members also reported changes to their literacy practices outside of our sessions. For example, one man talked about how now he “reads out” more in his English class (before, he had worried about “being labelled a dunce”); he also felt that his spelling and ability to tackle longer words by breaking them into chunks had improved too; another shared the texts we read with his cellmate; another said he checks out books from the library now; and others reported that they now stop and read phrases on signs around the prison.

Finally, we reflected upon how texts in prisons have a different status to texts outside. Without easy access to the internet and digital texts, the value of a paper text is increased; being able to hold and keep a text, to take it with you, read and re-read, put on the cell wall, is more important. Overall, the materiality of the texts, as well as their role in building community, extended outside of our reading group time and space.

Our shared learning – what has the pilot taught us?

Taking the group member and facilitator reflections together, this is our shared learning:

- the importance of working from local knowledge, including one-to-one conversations for recruitment
- the value of group members promoting the group themselves, which seems to link to the importance of this not being 'education' (potentially seen as remedial and stigmatised) but rather a discussion-based reading group
- the importance of facilitators planning and reflecting carefully, while leaving space for evolution and increasing participant autonomy
- the motivating power of it being *their* reading group, led increasingly by member ideas and preferences
- the value in the collaborative exchange of expertise offered by reading groups, allowing participants to be supported by others while demonstrating strengths and experience
- reading aloud and listening to others read (particularly when following along on the written text) is a powerful tool for reinforcing/ developing knowledge of how spoken words are encoded as written words. Reading aloud also means that those who can read less themselves can still listen and join in conversations, while developing decoding knowledge through listening and following along
- 'emergent readers' may be a complex and imperfect category, containing a range of needs, confidences and competences, but as a defining principle for a reading group, it works: it is a group for those who want to develop and practise reading in a supportive environment
- developing confidence is a vital part of reading development as all readers need to have confidence in our judgements in order to read, and a supportive, respectful reading group can make dramatic strides in developing this confidence
- the privileging of choice, personalisation and autonomy, important in any reading group, is even more important in the prison context where prisoners have "such a lack of agency over a lot of their life all the day, to have that choice, to have someone who'll actually listen to that and go, ok, well, we got you what you asked for. I think it goes a long way" (quotation from a facilitator)

Next steps

We are producing guidance documents for those who would like to run similar groups, including an account of the expertise involved in facilitating (for example, knowledge of reading, of adult education, of the prison context, of reading groups) and how we can support this, as well as guidance for creating a bank of texts. We will also have an offer of mentoring/bespoke support.

We are developing a webpage and a forum on the PRG website to create a community of practice, and we welcome further forms of involvement/partnership.

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