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JUVENILE JUSTICE BULLETIN

John J. Wilson, Acting Administrator **October 1994**

Improving Literacy Skills of Juvenile Detainees

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A characteristic of juveniles incarcerated in correctional and detention facilities is their poor experience with elementary and secondary education. For many, difficulties in reading underlie their poor academic achievement. However, it has been demonstrated that with effective instruction the reading levels of incarcerated youth can improve dramatically.

Rolf Loeber and colleagues at the Western Psychiatric Institute and Clinic of the University of Pittsburgh Medical School note a link between reading failure and delinquency:

> Both school performance, whether measured by reading achievement or teacher-rated reading performance, and retention in grade (i.e., being held back) relate to delinquency... The relationship between reading performance and delinquency appears even for first graders. Likewise, retention in grade associates with delinquency even for first graders. Delinquency is more likely for African-American males than for white males after adjusting for the effect of performance level and retention.[1]

The Problem

A substantial number of youth held in juvenile detention and correctional facilities are experiencing reading problems. A significant number—those reading below the fourth-grade level—are deemed functionally illiterate. Upon their release from confinement, these youth will experience great difficulty in achieving and competing in today's increasingly technological world.

The latest assessment of reading levels of incarcerated youth was conducted by Project READ in 1978. The study of 2,670 juvenile offenders, funded by the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (OJJDP), found that the average student, while 15 years, 6 months of age at the time of testing and in the ninth grade, was reading at a fourth-grade level. "Thirty-eight percent of all students scored below fourth grade."[2]

The Plan

OJJDP sought to fund a model that was designed to improve the literacy level of youth in juvenile detention and correctional facilities by training language arts teachers and relevant staff and volunteers in direct instruction methods to rapidly improve students' comprehension, particularly for those with reading disabilities. Direct instruction methods

[1] Loeber, Rolf, et al., *Urban Delinquency and Substance Abuse Initial Findings Report*. Washington, D.C.: Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention. 1993, p. 15.

[2] *To Make a Difference*. Silver Spring, MD: READ, Inc., 1978, p. 27.

From the Administrator

The average reading ability of youth confined in correctional institutions is at the fourth-grade level. As literacy has long been the foundation of a sound education, it is not surprising that many juvenile detainees have experienced serious academic difficulties.

The effects of such failures on the fragile self-esteem of adolescents are evident. Low self-esteem yields minimal motivation for academic achievement, and the tragic cycle continues.

The encouraging news is that proper pedagogy can produce significant improvement in reading skills—and in relatively short order. Fewer than 71 hours of instruction can result in an average gain in reading comprehension of 7 to 12 months.

This bulletin describes innovative, phonics-based programs that have proven successful in combating functional illiteracy and its adverse aftermath within our juvenile corrections system.

We trust you will find this information useful in your efforts to promote literacy.

John J. Wilson
Acting Administrator

use high levels of student engagement, and teacher-directed classrooms use sequenced structured materials appropriate for the student's ability.

In 1991 competitive grants were awarded to the Mississippi University of Women (MUW), in Columbus, and the Nellie Thomas Institute (NTI), in Monterey, California. Both grantees were experienced in using intensive systematic phonics[3] with at-risk youth and young adults. NTI had been teaching phonics to young adult inmates at the Soledad Penitentiary in California. The results were dramatic. Significantly increased skills in composition, vocabulary, mechanics, and spelling were noted for 75 percent of the participants. Moreover, the inmates demonstrated a newly found self-esteem and improved self-image. MUW had similar experiences working with inmates in the Mississippi prison system.

Since the grants were awarded, educators (teachers and volunteers) representing a dozen States[4] have been trained. In three States, the juvenile correctional officials agreed to release results of their phonics instruction. Student progress was measured by the Silvaroli Reading Inventory and other widely used means of measuring literacy skills.

In Mississippi, 192 males, ages 14 through 19, participated in the MUW project at facilities of the State Division of Youth Services. Tables 1 and 2 indicate their academic gains in grade equivalent scores based upon a 9-month school year. Statistical analysis indicates the posttest mean was significantly higher than the pretest mean for each area tested.

Table 1

Mean Spelling and Reading Gains, 1992–1993
Williams School—Oakley Campus
Raymond, Mississippi

Year	Spelling*	Word Recognition*	Oral Reading*	Reading Comp.**	Total Reading**	Instruction Time
1992	5 months	8 months	7 months	7 months	6 months	38 hours
					N=78	
1993	4 months	7 months	1 year	1 year	7 months	71 hours
					N=84	

Table 2

Mean Spelling and Reading Gains, 1993
East Columbia High School
Columbia, Mississippi

Year	Spelling*	Word Recognition*	Oral Reading*	Reading Comp.**	Total Reading***	Instruction Time
1993	1 month	1 year	1 year + 1 month	1 year	6 months	42 hours
					N=30	

* Silvaroli Classroom Reading Inventory
** Stanford Reading Achievement Tests
*** Peabody Individual Achievement Tests

Only students who scored at the third-grade level or below in reading and language arts were enrolled in the project. Each participant had attended public school. Most had been in school for at least 7 years and were still unable to read, spell, or write at a level regarded as literate. However, after 38 to 71 hours of instruction, the average gains in reading comprehension were between 7 months and 1 year. This achievement is noteworthy, particularly in view of the relatively small amount of instruction time.

One measure of students' improvement can be seen in before-and-after writing samples. Penmanship is taught and final drafts are written in the student's best penmanship. The samples of students' writing in the following figures illustrate not only improvements in writing, but in attitude as well; another dividend of this approach.

Significant strides were also accomplished and reported by NTI after only 40 hours of phonics instruction at a site in Washington State and two sites in Ohio, as illustrated by Table 3.

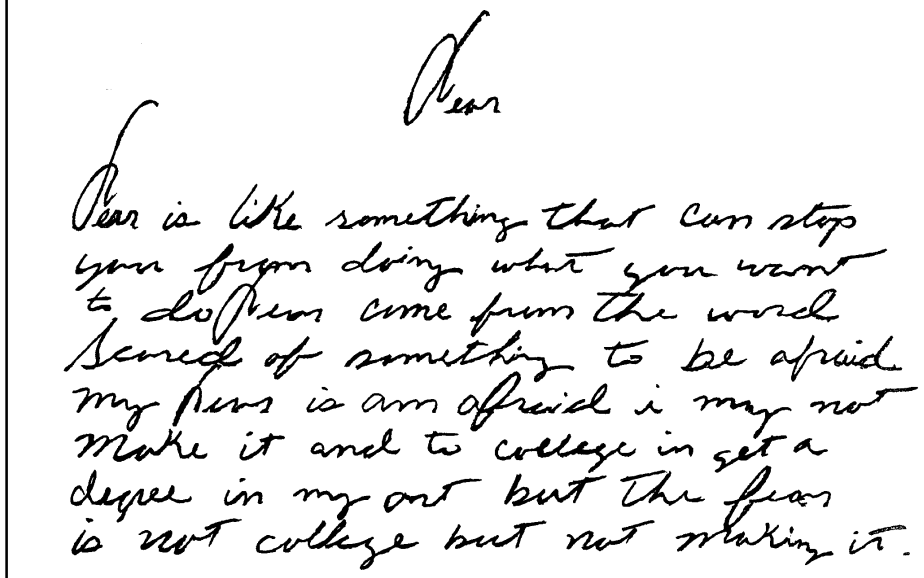
[3]As defined by Michael Brunner, phonics consists of teaching beginners to read and pronounce words by learning the letter and sound association of individual letters, letter groups, and especially syllables as well as the principles governing these associations. Brunner, *Retarding America: The Imprisonment of Potential*. Portland, OR: Halcyon House, 1993, p.133.

[4]Arizona, Arkansas, California, Colorado, Louisiana, Mississippi, New Mexico, Ohio, Pennsylvania, Tennessee, Virginia, and Washington.

Figure 1

Student Writing Sample—Before Instruction

9/2/93
Michael



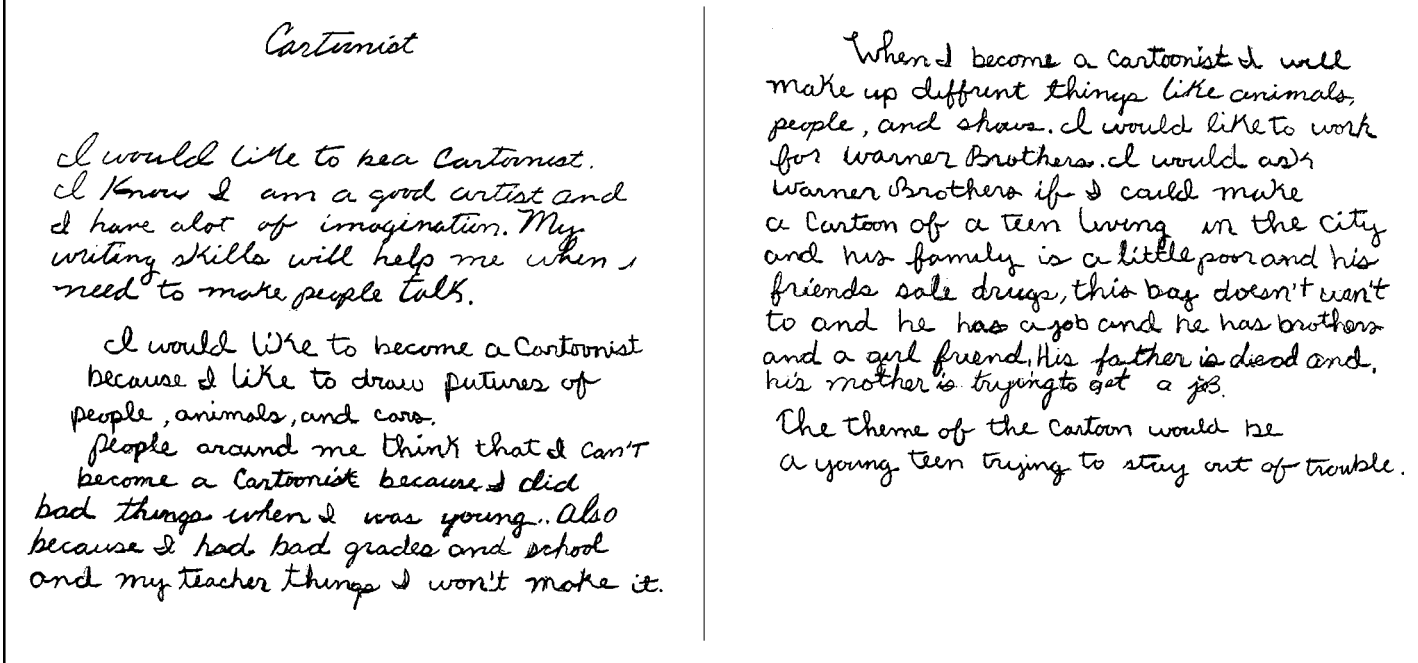
Fear

Fear is like something that can stop you from doing what you want to do Fear come from the word Scared of something to be afraid my fears is am afraid i may not make it and to college in get a degree in my ont but the fears is not college but not making it.

Figure 2

Student Writing Sample—After Instruction

10/27/93
Michael



Cartoonist

I would like to bea Cartoonist. I Know I am a good artist and I have alot of imagination. My writing skills will help me when I need to make people talk.

I would like to become a Cartoonist because I like to draw putures of people, animals, and cars.

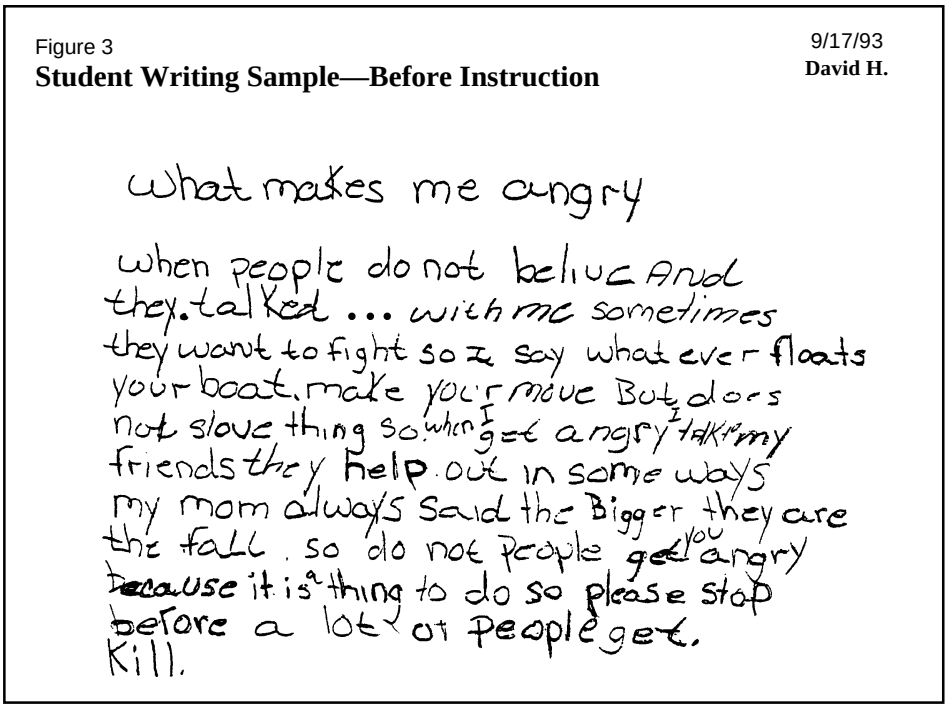
People around me think that I can't become a Cartoonist because I did bad things when I was young. Also because I had bad grades and school and my teacher things I won't make it.

When I become a Cartoonist I will make up diffrunt things like animals, people, and shaws. I would like to work for Warner Brothers. I would ask Warner Brothers if I could make a Cartoon of a teen living in the city and his family is a little poor and his friends sale drugs, this boy doesn't want to and he has a job and he has brothers and a girl friend. His father is diead and his mother is trying to get a job.

The theme of the Cartoon would be a young teen trying to stay out of trouble.

Figure 3
Student Writing Sample—Before Instruction

9/17/93
David H.

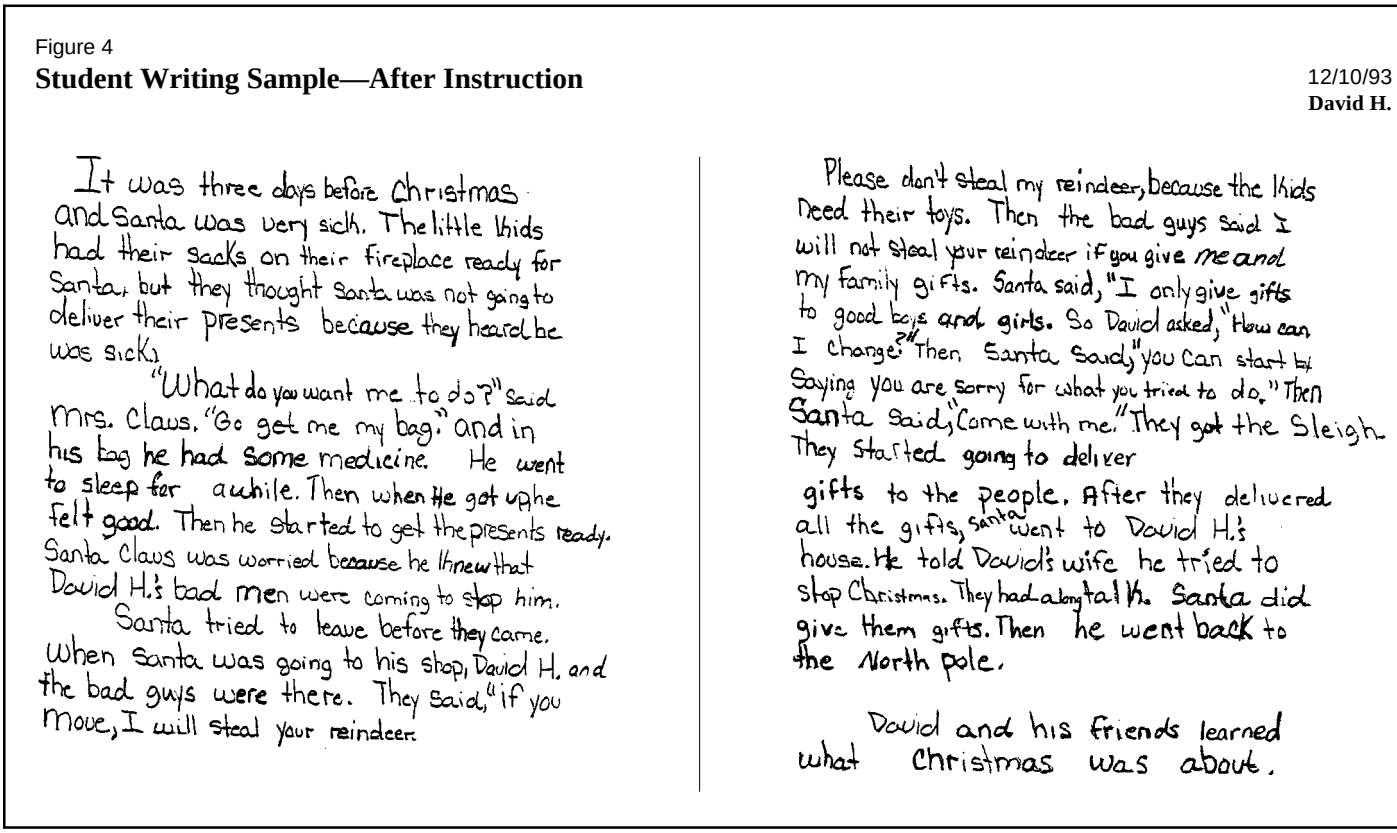


What makes me angry

when people do not beliuc And
they talked ... with me sometimes
they want to fight so I say what ever floats
your boat. make your move But does
not slove thing so when I get angry I talk to my
friends they help out in some ways
my mom always said the Bigger they are
the fall. so do not people get you angry
because it is a thing to do so please stop
before a lot of people get.
Kill.

Figure 4
Student Writing Sample—After Instruction

12/10/93
David H.



It was three days before Christmas and Santa was very sick. The little kids had their sacks on their fireplace ready for Santa, but they thought Santa was not going to deliver their presents because they heard he was sick.

"What do you want me to do?" said Mrs. Claws. "Go get me my bag." and in his bag he had some medicine. He went to sleep for awhile. Then when He got up he felt good. Then he started to get the presents ready. Santa Claws was worried because he knew that David H.'s bad men were coming to stop him.

Santa tried to leave before they came. When Santa was going to his shop, David H. and the bad guys were there. They said, "if you move, I will steal your reindeer.

Please don't steal my reindeer, because the kids need their toys. Then the bad guys said I will not steal your reindeer if you give me and my family gifts. Santa said, "I only give gifts to good boys and girls. So David asked, "How can I change?" Then Santa said, "you can start by saying you are sorry for what you tried to do." Then Santa said, "Come with me." They got the Sleigh. They started going to deliver gifts to the people. After they delivered all the gifts, Santa went to David H.'s house. He told David's wife he tried to stop Christmas. They had a long talk. Santa did give them gifts. Then he went back to the North pole.

David and his friends learned what Christmas was about.

Table 3
Average Reading and Comprehension Gains After Phonics Instruction

Facility	Session	Average Gain in Reading	Average Gain in Comprehension
Green Hill School, WA	Fall 1993 (I)	2 grade levels	2 grade levels
Green Hill School, WA	Fall 1993 (II)	3 grade levels	3.25 grade levels
Phoenix School, OH	Summer 1993	1.5 grade levels	1.5 grade levels
Phoenix School, OH	Fall 1993	2.5 grade levels	2.5 grade levels
Camp Raulston, OH	Fall 1993	2 grade levels	1.5 grade levels

Analysis

Designed to teach illiterate youth to read and write, these programs offer a nontraditional, motivational approach that provides students with immediate positive feedback and then encourages them to strive for success. The approach—not customarily found in schools—is noteworthy because frequently a juvenile offender's sense of inadequacy has been reinforced by the experience of academic failure.

The programs employ a progression of logically sequenced, multisensory lessons. A large part of the curriculum focuses on the development, integration, and application of phonics. Reading and writing skills are readily developed once the foundation in phonics has been laid.

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A 28-minute videotape discussing the activities of the projects described in this bulletin is available from the Juvenile Justice Clearinghouse for $12.95. To order a copy of *Retarding America—The Imprisonment of Potential* (NCJ 146605), write the Juvenile Justice Clearinghouse, Box 6000, Rockville, Maryland, 20850, or call 800–638–8736.

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