

Dyslexia project at Chelmsford prison

It is estimated that up to 10% of children in UK schools will be affected by some form of dyslexia. While it is recognised that many offenders have significant problems with reading and writing, recent work in prisons suggests that around 53% of inmates may have some form of dyslexia. Although prisons have educational facilities, a significant number of prisoners fail to make use of them. A combination of low self esteem, bitter memories of school and programmes that fail to tackle their dyslexia lead them to elect to stay in their cells, while others are becoming literate.

Prisoners themselves have cited poor literacy, and the low self-esteem that goes with it, as major factors in their re-offending. They are cut off from learning, and this attitude can stop them from entering valuable training. This training can often be an important part of rehabilitation and can break the cycle of re-offending. Ex offenders also describe how they want to continue with training, but find it difficult to locate educational support at the right level once they are released from prison.

Jackie Hewitt-Main, an Information Advice and Guidance Consultant, is engaged in ground-breaking work in Chelmsford Prison, addressing dyslexia with a three-pronged approach. She has been instrumental in encouraging prisoners to learn throughout the prison, and not just in the educational facility. She has introduced a Swedish computer program focussing on dyslexia and, crucially, encouraged the prisoners to help each other; i.e. to become mentors.

Jackie's own journey into prison education is a story in itself. Using her own life experiences, and more than her fair share of adversity, she has developed a passion to help other people with similar problems. She has severe dyslexia. "All through school I was recognised for my verbal skills, but was always put in remedial classes. I can still visualize walking down the long corridor with a few other children, heading for the 'special room'. I was bubbly and chatty in class, and excelled in practical subjects, yet regularly got 4% in exams."

By secondary school Jackie's self esteem was at rock bottom, and was seeing a psychiatrist to help her with school refusal and wanting to self-harm. "I blamed everyone else around me. I used to sit on my front door step with a piece of chalk, and my friend would go over and over spellings by writing them on the pavement, but I just couldn't remember them. Even now thinking about school makes me sweat and feel highly anxious."

Jackie left school at 15 with no qualifications. A short spell on a typing course was a rerun of school: "I got 98% throughout the year, until it came to dictation. No one realised my spelling was so bad, and I went from the top of the class to the bottom overnight." Jackie worked briefly as a receptionist and telephonist, where she could rely on her oral skills. She was soon to find a calling in retail work, and quickly discovered that she had a knack for selling clothes, and had no trouble with getting to know the stock and her customers' needs.

Jackie's eldest son helped her with maths, and unwittingly introduced her to what would now be called 'a multisensory approach to learning'. In order to teach his mother the concept of percentages, he made her roll up 100 pieces of kitchen foil. Using these as a teaching aid, Jackie soon grasped the concept. This small lesson was to have a major influence on Jackie's approach to adult education.

Jackie also recognises that at crucial points in her own life, often when her endeavours have been dealt disastrous blows, a mentor has guided her onto new paths. Mentor was Odysseus' wise and trusted counsellor, who was entrusted with the role of tutoring Odysseus' son Telemachus while Odysseus was fighting the Trojan Wars. According to Ellen Brown, Life Design Counsellor, the term 'mentor' has come to mean "trusted person, informal coach, wise advisor, friend, sponsor, safe guide and example". Ellen emphasises the importance of the mentor acting as someone who helps us develop our optimal pathways through life. It is guidance rather than teaching that is the most important aspect of mentoring. This point is echoed by Vince Hegedorn of East Mentoring Forum, who encourages mentors to "...listen and draw out from people what it is they want to do, and give them the confidence and inner belief in themselves."

A local businessman could see Jackie's potential as a business partner, and helped her start her own health food business. This led to her studying nutrition in Seattle. She was on the verge of clinching a major deal with a Californian company, to ship over to the UK £100,000 worth of quinoa, amaranth and other health foods. But her business collapsed. "In order to secure the loan I had to write a business plan for the bank. It took me months. I couldn't get my thoughts down on paper. We missed the deadline and the shipment was cancelled."

Jackie pulled herself out of despair and worked as a freelance business advisor. She had to give up work when her 15 year old son was involved in a major car crash and received head injuries resulting in brain damage. He was regularly getting into trouble with the police, because the brain damage had affected his ability to control his temper. Jackie was terrified that her son would end up in prison. It was this set of traumatic circumstances that led Jackie on her own path to prison: as an educator and mentor.

Jackie enrolled on a course in computer studies at South East Essex College, and her tutor, Sue Blackburn, soon recognised that Jackie was 'a classic case of dyslexia'. Sue also saw Jackie's potential to help other learners with difficulties. "Sue would send young lads to me who had failed exams. I would go through the problems, e.g. in maths, and teach them in such a way that they understood. It was teaching them with a different method that helped them go on pass their re-takes." This experience convinced Jackie that she could teach adults, and so began another career, working for Rathbone, organising local youngsters to learn construction skills. She went on to set up her own company helping adults to get into practical jobs, and her company was nominated for the NATWEST Essex County-Wide Local New Company

Award. Again she was on the verge of a major financial breakthrough, when she was faced with a major disappointment: "We applied for £1.2millions from a European fund, but at the last minute our promise of match-funding was withdrawn. I was sliding back down the snake again".

But help arrived, in the shape of local Business Mentor Tony Kimberley, and Jackie was climbing up the ladder again. Tony encouraged her to study for a degree in Special Educational Needs in Adults at South East Essex College. After five weeks she was struggling, but was officially diagnosed as dyslexic and was awarded a Statement of Special Educational Needs, making her eligible for a significant amount of IT support. At the end of her first year Jackie's eldest son was made redundant, and had the chance to go to university, so Jackie left college to support him, despite the fact that she had been only eight marks away from a 2:1.

Crucially for Jackie, the course had included a voluntary work placement. Jackie had read about literacy needs in prisons, and asked to go to Borewood Hall Women's Prison in Hockley, Essex. Here she saw that adult learners needed to experience different teaching approaches to meet the adults' learning styles. This experience led Jackie to apply for a job working in Chelmsford prison, working for four days per week on a pilot scheme funded by East Mentoring Forum.

It was then that Jackie saw prisoners experience the same fear and physical symptoms of anxiety that she experienced at school. "One prisoner began sweating and scratching and feeling highly anxious as soon as we entered the education facility", Jackie recalls. "I had planned to work with ten prisoners in the education facility, but only four would come with me. The other six stayed in their cells. They all had low self esteem, and extremely negative memories of school."

Jackie was determined that all prisoners assigned to her should have access to learning, and Prison Officers recognised that this would mean that she should work with the prisoners away from the education facilities and in the wings themselves. However the impact of her work was diminished because she only had access to individual prisoners for a relatively short time each week. An effective form of distance learning was required.

This was to come in the form of a Swedish computer program called Lexion. Lexion is computer software specifically designed for people with dyslexia. It provides short assessment tasks followed by immediate feedback on the nature of the student's difficulties, and direct access to hundreds of exercises that specifically work on these key problem areas. The tutor can then tailor the exercises to suit the student's interests, including downloading images from Google and other search engines, making the exercises more rewarding.

A feature unique to Lexion is that it allows tutors to download work onto the student's PC, either by email or on memory stick. This aspect of the program led Jackie to what was to prove to be a major breakthrough. With Prison Officers' cooperation, Jackie now had the means to provide quality distance

learning on the wings. Her experiences of mentoring were to provide the solution to the problem of her limited time. "I showed prisoners how they could become mentors to each other, by carefully matching mentors to other inmates. We were all surprised at how rapidly this took off and how impressive the results have been".

Prisoners and prison staff had a chance to celebrate their achievements at a recent awards ceremony at Chelmsford Prison, hosted by East Mentoring Forum. Prisoner after prisoner affirmed the importance of Jackie's input. As someone with dyslexia she can empathise with the prisoners, and also provide valuable support in the form of assessment and learning programmes. Brian explained how he discovered that by becoming a mentor he is developing his own skills, as well as helping others. 23 year-old Shawn said, "I now have GCSE maths and a qualification in food hygiene. I have learned that I have the skills that I did not know were there; e.g. spelling. I want to continue learning when I leave prison." One of the Prison officers freely admitted that he couldn't see how the system could possibly work. "I was sceptical, but can now see that this computer program and the mentoring scheme give prisoners an interest in learning."

Results of Jackie's pilot scheme are soon to be published in her report for the East Mentoring Forum, funded by the East of England Development Agency. Among the testimonials from prisoners and accolades for Jackie and her work are pointers towards the future. Jackie wants to see a sustainable programme of prisoner support, including mentoring. She is currently working with prison staff to develop a course where Prison Officers and prisoners can train to be mentors. The hope is that mentoring will be regarded as a 'job' in prison, giving it the same status as other aspects of prison work that are rewarded with pay and privileges. Jackie also wants to set up of a scheme where fathers in prison and their and children can work together on literacy. The aim is to break the cycle that can exist in families where dyslexia is an inherited trait. Over the generations whole families come to believe that, as Jackie succinctly puts it: "we are a thick family, and education and training is not for us".

A major part of Jackie's vision is to provide a mentoring service for ex-offenders, to help them make life choices, and to break the cycle of re-offending. This vision is shared by many Prison Officers, including one who said at the awards ceremony, "What I'd like to see now is this important work continuing when prisoners are released."

A Senior Officer puts it simply, "I want to see more Jackies!"