

## Understanding The Complexities of Offenders' Special Learning Needs

by Laura Weisel, , & A. Toops, & R. Schwarz

*When compared to the general population, the offender population is known to have lower-than-average academic skills, with the vast majority not having completed high school (Haigler, et.al., 1994, Bureau of Justice Statistics, 1988). Worse, the offender population has a significantly higher incidence of disabilities, including learning disabilities (LD) (Haigler, 1994; Mears & Aron, 2003; Steurer, 1996). Estimates of those in corrections facilities needing special education hover near 40percent of juveniles and at least 50 percent of adult prisoners (Winters, 1997; Mears and Aron, 2003; Corley, 1996). Added to these challenges are high incidences of mental illness, poverty, and substance abuse (Califano, 2000; Winters, 1997).*

Many of the disabilities and learning disabilities among the offender population were previously unsuspected and undiagnosed, or if noticed, were misdiagnosed (Mears & Aron, 2003). School has been a painful experience for many and their feelings of shame and anger at being unsuccessful in a world where academic achievement is highly valued run deep (Winters, 1997). In addition to learning problems, Winters (1997) notes, incarcerated youth "...usually have maladaptive, passive learning styles, and attribute their lack of academic success to extra individual factors." (p.2)

Based on these well-documented observations, two states, Missouri and Ohio, decided to institute holistic screenings to obtain specific information on underlying learning challenges of offenders that can lead to more effective instructional programming. In this article, we will examine the initial findings from Missouri and Ohio and the related changes they are making in their corrections education systems to address the offenders' multiple learning issues.

### Screening Procedure

Both the Missouri Department of Corrections and The Ohio Department of Rehabilitation and Correction chose to administer PowerPath to Basic Learning<sup>TM</sup> (2003), a holistic diagnostic screening and intervention system. In Missouri, offenders entering the correction system who met the criteria of being struggling learners were screened; in Ohio, offenders already in the system who met the criteria of being struggling learners were screened. According to these Department of Corrections policies, PowerPath screenings are administered to those offenders whose reading and other academic skills are extremely weak (as indicated in Missouri by a reading level of 5.0 or below on the Wide Range Achievement Test, 1998, or in Ohio

below a score of 220 on the CASAS, 2005, along with a score of 12 or higher on the Washington State Screening for Learning Disabilities, 2001).

Conducting a holistic diagnostic screening for struggling learners consists of evaluating the basic processing functions and skills needed to successfully learn and perform academic and workplace tasks (Weisel, 2003a). These processing functions and skills include:

- ⊙ Vision functions: ability to use both eyes to see at near and far point, , and binocularity, defined as the integration of both eyes to focus on a single object and to move smoothly along lines of print
- ⊙ Hearing function
- ⊙ Scotopic sensitivity: – a neural pathway dysfunction which leads to sensitivity to light and difficulty with reading black letters on white paper. This sensitivity can negatively affect reading fluency and sustained reading
- ⊙ Attention difficulties: hyperactivity, distractibility and impulsivity, difficulty with completing tasks, hypersensitivity to criticism
- ⊙ Information Processing
  - Visual processing skills: visual-spatial orientation, memory, closure, discrimination, figure-ground discrimination
  - Visual motor integration: transferring visual information to motor output (the ability to copy)
  - Auditory processing: (working) memory and comprehension
  - Basic reading encoding and decoding skills: sound symbol associations, auditory and visual sequencing

In addition, in an extended interview, offenders are asked to tell about themselves, their learning and work histories, family learning histories, medical issues that could affect learning, and other aspects of their lives that may be relevant to their difficulty in learning.

## **The Results**

Missouri and Ohio collected interview and screening data on 510 offenders who met their states' criteria for screening for special learning needs. Data were collected from 2003 through 2004. These data reveal the complexity of the issues faced by these struggling learners.

Individuals were screened for visual and auditory function difficulties while wearing any prescribed glasses, contacts and/or hearing aids. These data include results from those who had weaknesses *despite* having corrective lenses or hearing aids as well as results from those without any corrective lenses or hearing aids.

- More than 30 percent had weaknesses in *distance acuity*.
- About 38 percent showed weaknesses in *near acuity* at reading distance.
- Nearly 40 percent had problems with *binocularity* — using the two eyes together at reading distance — including: *tracking*, which means moving eyes together along a line of print; *convergence*, which means focusing at the same point; *alignment*, which means seeing the same thing with both eyes; or *amblyopia*, which is lazy eye.
- About 38 percent had weaknesses in *basic hearing function*.

Screening for information processing difficulties yielded similarly stark results.

- Approximately 35 percent indicated a weakness in *visual motor integration*, copying or transferring written information from one place to another.

More than 50 percent had weaknesses in *auditory comprehension* for both short-term recall of facts and making inferences. Attention difficulties were identified as well.

- Nearly 40 percent of the offenders were identified as having *mild attention difficulties*.
- Another 35 percent were identified as having *moderate to severe attention difficulties*.

Scotopic sensitivity greatly affects the capacity for sustained reading, fluency and comprehension. Not surprisingly, it also compounds frustration levels.

- Slightly more than 50 percent of the offenders were identified as having moderate to severe *scotopic sensitivity*.

Another 35 percent were identified as having mild scotopic sensitivity. Reading encoding and decoding difficulties

- The majority of offenders screened made phonological errors (problems correctly matching letters to sounds) in reading single words and spelling.

Of the offenders screened in the Missouri and Ohio systems, fewer than 20 percent did not have any learning difficulties with functions or information processing, 20 percent had no attention difficulties, and only 15 percent indicated no difficulties with scotopic sensitivity. In other words, 80 to 85 percent of these learners had documented function or processing challenges interfering with efforts to learn.

### **Offender History**

Just as a majority of offenders screened had learning challenges, in interviews, most offenders reported that their learning challenges were present from their earliest years in elementary school. More than 50 percent stated that they had been told they had a “learning disability,” with almost equal numbers reporting they had received special education, Title 1, or other remedial services while in school the others had never been told or helped. Whether or not their learning difficulties were

ever actually identified, these offenders felt that their learning needs had not been fully recognized and/or that their learning needs were not met by the educational services they received. They felt they had been left in the dark about why they struggled to learn and stated they had not been offered specific interventions they could use to become successful learners. Many described painful and frustrating interactions with family members and teachers that occurred through misinterpreting what was said or how it was said.

How do these results compare with the incidence of such problems in the non-offender population? Little agreement exists as to the incidence of learning problems in the adult basic and literacy populations except that it is high. Estimates obtained from non-specific screenings range from 30 percent to as high as 80 percent of the adult learners having learning challenges that have had a negative impact upon learning (see [www.nifl.gov/nifl/faqs.html#learning](http://www.nifl.gov/nifl/faqs.html#learning)). Little is known in the wider scope of adult learning problems about vision, hearing, or other types of problems. Except where diagnostic screenings have been instituted by program choice or where diagnostic screenings are state mandated, no systematic approach has been taken in adult education to identify the specific issues underlying academic challenges among adult learners.

### **After the Screening**

In Missouri and Ohio, the screening process is the first step in the correction system for offenders who meet the criteria for being at risk of having special learning needs. The two states have established moderately different criteria for deciding which entering offenders are administered the diagnostic screenings and each system is working to develop a way for the screening results to be sent with the offender to his/her home institution for follow-up and for development of needed interventions.

Having the “front-end” covered for new admissions, the Missouri and Ohio have recognized that it is important to establish models and protocols for conducting screenings at the institution level for current students in education programming. Ohio has decided to establish five model institution sites at which a process can be created with input from institution-based administrators and instructional staff. Elements from each of these model sites will be adapted and used to rollout institution-based screening protocols that the entire education system can utilize.

Missouri has chosen to move forward with implementation of screenings for special learning needs at all institutions. Each institution uses special education and literacy staff, trained in implementing the screenings and interventions, to support institution-based screenings. Education administrators, in turn, are designing a local approach to support screening and ensure implementation of methods that use the information gained from screenings to accommodate special learning needs. Both Missouri’s

Central Office of Special Education and the literacy administrators provide additional trainings and on-site technical assistance as needed.

With one year under their belts, both systems are looking at making revisions in their initial roll-out plans to ensure that individual institutions are moving forward with identifying the special learning needs of offenders already in the system.

At the state level, service collaboration agreements are beginning to be discussed with health, mental health, and recovery services so that these departments can address issues that have contributed to and grown from the learning challenges identified in the data. State departments are often “silos,” with each department running autonomously. Moving to a holistic service approach for offenders with special learning needs is requiring that departments collaborate in new ways at the state level so that collaborative actions at the institutional level can follow.

Part of the focus of the collaborative efforts in Ohio and Missouri corrections systems is to create ways of supporting professional development to ensure that instructors can learn and demonstrate the skills needed to:

- Provide offenders with meaningful feedback from their diagnostic screenings on the nature of their strengths and challenges and engage in a conversation about how these have impacted the offender’s life.
- Engage the offender in a dialogue to help them learn to select instructional accommodations that will address their learning challenges.
- Provide explicit, ongoing, purposefully structured instruction in the skills of learning (metacognitive skills) including:
  - breaking down tasks into manageable pieces
  - applying selected instructional accommodations
  - managing time and selecting materials
  - transferring learning from one situation to another
- Offer learning situations that:
  - are active
  - are project-based
  - use multiple ways of learning

- rely on groups of students co-planning learning sessions and working collaboratively, participating in evaluating the success of the planned instructional time and identifying ways to improve the next session.

## Conclusion

Based upon these two state initiatives, new data has been acquired that provides a clearer understanding of the challenges of offenders struggling to learn. As a result, new approaches are being tried to address the systemic factors that have kept struggling learners struggling, and new questions are being formed that will, when addressed, drive services that are based on real, *identified* needs instead of assumptions. As these two states move forward, more offenders who have not been successful with learning will be able to find success. They will be able to learn needed academic skills, skills for better management of life, and ultimately have a better chance at sustaining employment.

Missouri's and Ohio's experiences will provide models which other states' departments of correction education can use as they begin to establish policies and procedures to

- ⊙ institute diagnostic screening to learn more about the most vulnerable offenders.
- ⊙ conduct specific professional development so that instructors can better identify, understand, and provide interventions for offenders with special learning needs;
- ⊙ and find ways to shift the paradigm of education services to align with these data and other research findings on the elements for success in learning, life, and employment for persons with multiple learning challenges (Raskind, et al, 1999, Mears and Arons, 2003).

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## **About the Authors**

**Laura Weisel** has 30 years experience in community and institutional-based adult basic, literacy, special education, and mental health services as an instructor, program administrator, researcher, trainer, and consultant and author of PowerPath to Basic Learning, an intake, diagnostic screening and intervention system.

**Alan Toops** has spent the last 30 years as a correctional educator in Ohio's prison system with positions as instructor, school Principal, and Assistant Superintendent of the Ohio Department of Rehabilitation and Correction's school system. Currently, Mr. Toops is Executive Director of the Ohio Literacy Network and the Correction Education Specialist with The TLP Group.

**Robin Schwarz** has been English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) practitioner for nearly 40 years and a specialist in learning disabilities for more than 35 years. Ms. Schwarz is now a partner with the TLP Group, broadening PowerPath's scope to include multi-cultural students and ESOL initiatives.