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An evaluation of basic skills training for prisoners

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This report describes the main findings from a longitudinal study of 464 prisoners starting basic skills training between December 2001 and July 2002. The main aim of the study was to assess changes in prisoners' literacy and numeracy levels. It also examined the relationship between basic skills education and post-release offending and employment outcomes.

Key points

- 80% of the sample received basic skills training delivered in a classroom setting; 5% received training 'embedded' with other activities and 16% received a mixture of both types of training. Embedded training was more common among young offenders and juveniles; older prisoners had more hours of training.
- Levels of literacy and numeracy had improved after training, notably among those originally assessed at below level 1 (see over). There was a statistically significant increase in the proportion of the sample assessed at level 1 or above for reading, spelling, punctuation and numeracy and around 15% were assessed at level 2 or above after training.
- Prisoners who received at least 30 hours of training were more likely to have improved their literacy and numeracy skills than those who received less – this was the only statistically significant predictor of achieving level 1 reading, punctuation and numeracy skills.
- About half of those followed-up after release had worked since leaving custody but employment was not associated with achieving level 1 basic skills – most had returned to a previous job or found work through family and friends.
- Under half of the follow-up sample reported reoffending after release. Reoffending was less common among those who had achieved level 1 or above for spelling, punctuation and numeracy (this was not statistically significant).

Prisoners tend to have poor basic literacy and numeracy skills which may be an obstacle to employment and successful resettlement after release from custody. Prisoners have been identified as a priority group for improving adult literacy and numeracy in the Government's national strategy (DfEE, 2001). However, there is little available evidence on the value of basic skills training for prisoners in terms of its direct or indirect impact on employment and reoffending.

This was the first longitudinal study of basic skills training for prisoners to be undertaken in England and Wales, and was conducted by the Office for National Statistics for the Home Office

and the Department for Education and Skills. The 10 participating establishments covered a range of different prison types, including adult male (21 years or over), young offender (aged 18 to 20), juvenile (aged 15 to 17) and female prisoners.

Their educational needs were assessed at reception with the Basic Skills Agency (BSA) Initial Assessment tool. This has since been adjusted, in line with the National Standards for literacy and numeracy, and did not assess at level 2. The category 'above entry level/below level 1' is included here but is no longer used to assess learners.

The Qualifications and Curriculum Authority's definition of literacy and numeracy skills

- **Pre-entry:** below National Curriculum level 1
- **Entry level:** National Curriculum levels 1 to 3
- **Level 1:** National Curriculum levels 4 to 5. Equivalent to what is expected of the average 11-year-old
- **Level 2:** GCSE, grade A* to C.

Prisoners assessed at level 1 or below in reading, spelling, punctuation or numeracy before the start of basic skills training were eligible for the study. Data were collected at three stages over a 15-month period: at the start of training; around four to five months later (for those still in prison); between two and 12 months after release. The first stage of interviews was conducted with prisoners who started a basic skills course between December 2001 and July 2002 (n=464).

Basic Skills Coordinators (BSCs) assessed respondents' skill levels four or five months after the start of training or when the training stopped, if this occurred earlier. BSCs' progress assessments were available for about 60% of the original stage 1 sample or 85% of cases where the initial skills assessment had been provided. BSCs also provided data on the type and duration of training received, although the completeness of these data varied.

Changes in basic skills levels are given for cases where matched pre- and post-training assessment data were available. For analysis, achievement of level 1 or above is used as a summary measure of progress. Employment and offending outcomes are presented for those prisoners successfully followed-up after release.

The sample

90% of the pre-training sample (n=464) were male; 93% were sentenced prisoners. 64% were serving sentences of less than three years; 24% less than a year. Most were under 25 years: 38% were 16–19; 31% were 20–24. 49% had done some paid work in the 12 months before their sentence; 22% had never been employed. Educational achievement was poor – 64% had not gained qualifications from school or college. 67% of the sample had left school before the age of 16; 73% had played truant at some stage. 35% had done some basic skills education in prison before.

Delivery of basic skills training

Basic skills training at the prisons was usually delivered in a classroom setting and focussed solely on improving literacy and numeracy skills (discrete training). Based on information given by BSCs (available for 308 cases), 80% received this conventional form of discrete basic skills training. 5% received basic skills training that was embedded with other types of training such as computer skills or practical workshops; the remaining 16% a mixture of discrete and embedded training.

Young offender and juvenile establishments tended to integrate basic skills with other forms of training. In these establishments, 20% of the sample received training in an embedded form and a further 36% had a mixture of

discrete and embedded basic skills training. Those from the two adult male and young offender prisons had some mixed training (19%) but 80% received discrete training only. In the remaining adult prisons, almost all (94%) the sample received discrete basic skills training.

The total amount of basic skills training received varied. Based on BSC data (n=314), the amounts were:

- less than 30 hours training – 27%
- between 30 and 99 hours – 34%
- 100 hours or more – 39%.

There was a statistically significant relationship between prisoners' age and the amount of basic skills training received. Older prisoners were more likely than younger groups to have had 100 hours training or more: 52% of those aged 25 or over, compared with 44% of those aged 20–24 and 30% of the 16–19 age group. In contrast, younger prisoners were significantly more likely to have received less than 30 hours of training: 32% of those aged 16–19, compared with 23% of those aged 20–24 and 18% of those aged 25 or over.

As would be expected, prisoners serving longer sentences received more training – 79% of those serving sentences of 12 months or more received at least 30 hours of training, compared with 47% for those sentenced to under 12 months. This difference was statistically significant, even when analysed separately for adult and young offender/juvenile establishments.

Changes in basic skills levels

Table 1 shows changes in basic skills levels where there was matched pre- and post-training assessment data. Before training, the majority of the sample were below level 1 for reading, spelling, punctuation and numeracy. Between 22% and 36% were assessed at pre-entry level. Almost half were assessed at level 1 or above for reading, spelling and punctuation and over a third were at level 1 for numeracy.

There were improvements after training, notably among those originally assessed at the lowest skill level; very few prisoners were assessed at pre-entry level after training. For each type of skill there was a statistically significant increase in the proportion of the sample assessed at level 1 or above. This was most evident for spelling and punctuation, where the proportion assessed at level 1 or above approximately doubled after training. The proportion assessed at level 1 or above for all four skills had also significantly increased from 45% to 69%.

Many of the prisoners judged to be at level 1 or above after training had been assessed at this level before their training: 71% for reading, 43% for spelling, 36% for punctuation and 64% for numeracy. The proportion of the sample achieving level 1 or above (i.e. level 1 or above after training, but below level 1 at the start of training) was 18% for reading, 27% for spelling, 29% for punctuation and 20% for numeracy. A small minority of prisoners were judged to be at level 2 or above after training: 17% for reading and 15% for spelling, punctuation and numeracy.

Table 1 Skill levels before and after basic skills training

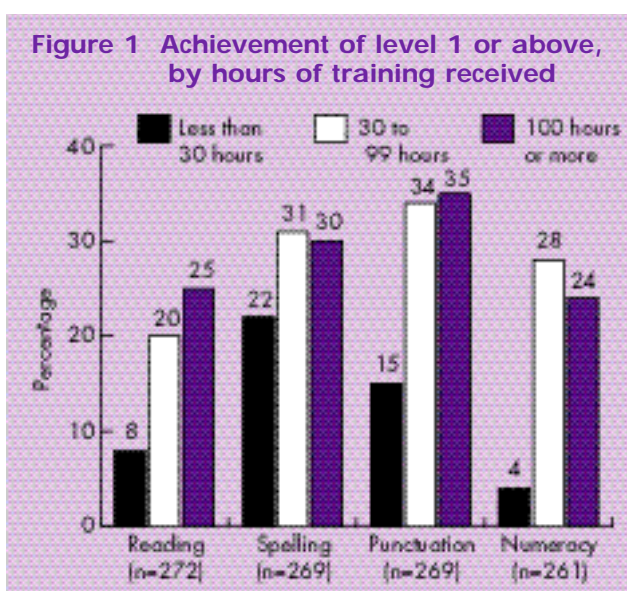
Skill level	Reading		Spelling		Punctuation		Numeracy	
	Pre-training	Post-training	Pre-training	Post-training	Pre-training	Post-training	Pre-training	Post-training
	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
Pre-entry	23	3	26	6	36	8	22	4
At entry	16	19	19	16	25	24	24	24
Above entry, below level 1	16	17	33	31	23	23	17	16
Level 1 or above	45	61	22	47	17	45	37	56
N	290		287		287		276	

Improved literacy and numeracy: linked factors

Logistic regression analyses were conducted to assess the relationship between a range of key variables and improved basic skills. Improvement was defined as achieving level 1 or above after training. Separate analyses were conducted for reading, spelling, punctuation and numeracy. Each included the following independent variables: age, sex, prisoner type, sentence length, hours of tuition received and type of tuition. The results are expressed as odds ratios. The only statistically significant predictor of improved skills was the amount of training received – if prisoners received at least 30 hours of training the odds of achieving level 1 or above were increased as follows:

- reading skills – nearly five times greater
- punctuation – nearly two and a half times greater
- numeracy – by over 11 times.

There were no significant predictors of improved spelling. Figure 1 shows the proportion of the sample with improved basic skills by hours of training received. A small minority of prisoners who received less than 30 hours of training improved their reading (8%), punctuation (15%) or numeracy skills (4%) to level 1 or above. For these three skills, a substantially greater proportion of prisoners who had 30 hours or more of training achieved level 1 or above. For spelling, the difference was relatively small. For all four skills, there was little distinction between prisoners who received 30 to 99 hours of training and those who received at least 100 hours.



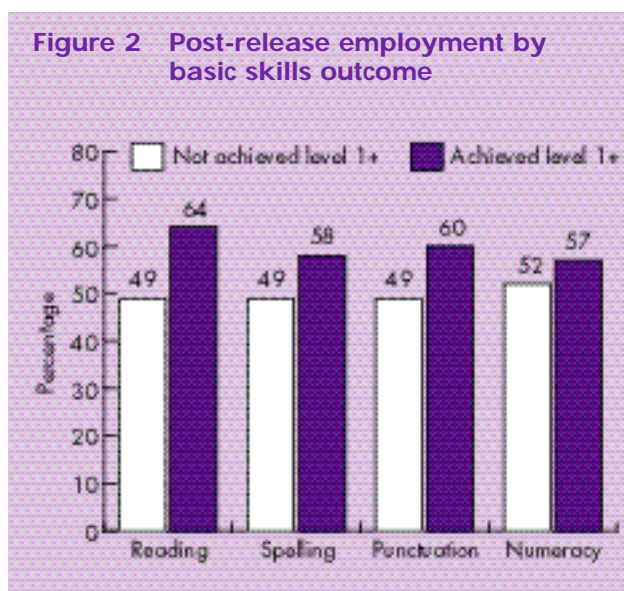
Employment and offending after release

93% of prisoners interviewed before training agreed to be contacted again after release from prison. Due to time constraints, only those released before the end of 2002 were eligible for a post-release interview (n=290). 133 prisoners were successfully followed-up between two and 12 months after release. Matched pre- and post-training assessment data were available for between 82 and 87 of these cases (depending on the type of skill measured).

Employment

51% of the post-release sample had done some paid work since their release from prison. Of those who had not worked, 2% were on a government scheme for employment training; 25% had looked for work unsuccessfully; 22% had not looked for employment. A greater proportion of younger prisoners had worked since release. 61% of the 16–19 age group had found employment, compared with 48% of those aged 20–24 and 40% of those aged 25 or over (difference not statistically significant).

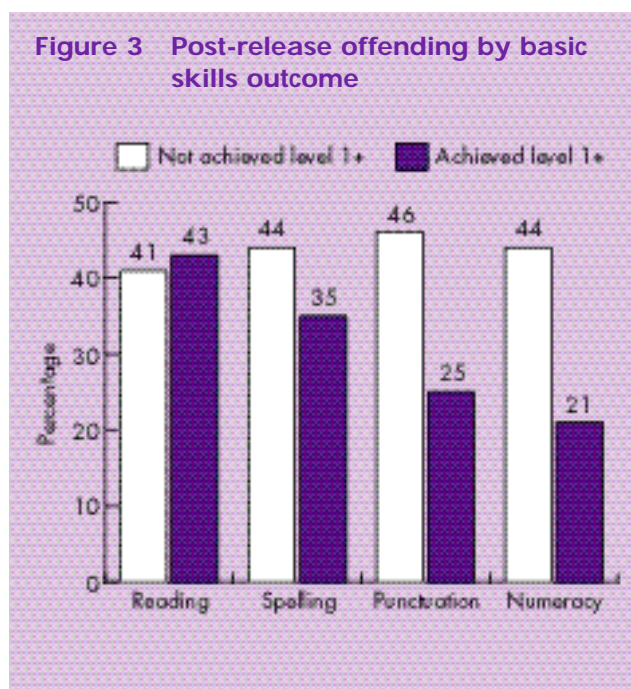
The relationship between improved basic skills and post-release employment was examined in terms of whether prisoners had achieved level 1 or above (Figure 2). Between 57% and 64% of prisoners who achieved level 1 or above for each skill had found employment but about half of the remainder of the follow-up sample had also done so. None of these differences were statistically significant.



Consistent with previous research (Niven and Olagundoye, 2002), factors such as links with previous employers and family contacts appeared to be more strongly related to employment outcomes. 62% of the prisoners who found employment (n=68), had done so after leaving prison. Only 9% had arranged a job during custody. The most frequently reported route to employment (38%) was through family and friends and a further 29% had returned to the same job as before going to prison. Only 25% had found a job through conventional methods of job search.

Offending

After release from prison, 16% of the follow-up sample had been re-imprisoned; 35% reported being convicted of an offence; 26% reported committing an offence for which they had not been convicted. When combined, these measures showed that 44% of the sample had reoffended and 56% had not. Figure 3 shows results for this combined reoffending measure. Smaller proportions of those who achieved level 1 or above for spelling (35%), punctuation (25%) and numeracy (21%) reported reoffending compared with the rest of the sample (differences not statistically significant).



Prisoners interviewed after release were asked whether basic skills training had made them more or less likely to reoffend. The majority (64%) said that the basic skills training they received in prison had made no difference to their chances of reoffending – 32% thought it made them less likely to reoffend and 4% more likely. Those who had reoffended (n=58) were asked about possible factors related to their offending. The most common responses were drink or drugs (55%) and lack of money (45%). Fewer linked their offending to problems with employment (17%), accommodation (14%) or relationships (14%). None made a link between their offending and a lack of basic skills.

Conclusions

The conclusions are subject to some caveats. The sample was not representative of the prison population, nor of all prisoners who started basic skills training in the first half of 2002, and there was substantial sample attrition at the post-release stage of the study. It would also have been preferable to measure prisoners' progress with a structured assessment tool rather than BSCs' assessments of improved basic skills. Finally, as with many research designs, direct causal relationships between interventions and outcomes cannot be inferred.

Despite these limitations, the results provide evidence that basic skills training can improve prisoners' literacy and numeracy skills in a relatively short period of time. Regular attendance at training sessions is important if learners' basic skills are to improve (Brooks et al., 2001). The amount of training received (at least 30 hours) was the only significant predictor of improved literacy and numeracy. Prisoners may well, therefore, benefit from more intensive delivery of basic skills education, particularly those sentenced to relatively short terms. Over half of prisoners sentenced to less than a year received less than 30 hours of training.

Improvements in literacy and numeracy, however, were not significantly related to prisoners' chances of finding employment or reoffending after release. Prisoners themselves tended not to link offending to their literacy and numeracy skills. Collectively, these results suggest that improving prisoners' basic skills alone is unlikely to have a major impact on their prospects for successful resettlement. Further research is required for a more definitive examination of the complex relationship between basic skills training and employment and offending outcomes.

References

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