

Toe by Toe

Cheryl Bicket and Christopher Morgan of the Shannon Trust on their affordable solution to prisoner illiteracy

About half our prisoners effectively cannot read and most leave prison unimproved. It is not the prisons' fault. Often allergic to class-work, they hide it skilfully or pretend they don't care. They seek self-esteem in aggressive behaviour or else give up and perhaps fall back on drugs. But they do care, only they believe it's too late and it nearly is, because they need a lot of private, individual tuition, far beyond the scope or the budget of prison education departments. So 35,000 pre-literate but often clever criminals are being dumped back into society each year, although, while constrained inside, they have had a great chance to learn.

The Shannon Trust thinks it has a solution. It persuades literate prisoners to become reading coaches, using a highly structured manual called Toe by Toe which the Trust provides free so long as its rules are accepted. There are three rules. Lessons must last only 20 minutes, be at least five times a week and one-to-one. With Toe by Toe, it takes on average four to six months to learn to read. All the prison has to do is provide a space and a time when mentor and mentee can meet, plus some light supervision. Many prisoners find mentoring the most satisfying work available and even hardened non-readers, who wouldn't go near education, will accept help from a mate in private. It need cost the tax payer nothing although some governors voluntarily spend a little to help it run smoothly. No-one is paid. Everyone is a volunteer.

Success and acceptance

It took three years of trial and error in Wandsworth prison until in 2000 a young officer, Neil Lodge, took up the idea and ran with it. Within a year, 48 men on Onslow Wing had learned to read. Even so, other prisons remained sceptical until 2003, when the Trust and the POA formed an alliance, and the idea began to catch on. There are now only eight prisons that have not yet tried

it. Over 1000 prisoners have learned to read at a unit cost to the Trust of about £70, and none to the taxpayer. It has spread despite official scepticism, but in August 2005 the DFES finally, but wholeheartedly, endorsed it—while warning that it must remain the informality critical to its success.

There are currently about 900 mentors and 3,000 mentees but there are at least 35,000 inmates needing help. The Trust has a volunteers nearly everywhere, ready to

support nearby prisons, but from the outside. An IMB member monitoring from inside would be invaluable to them.

30-08-05

Hi my name is John
 Forest Bank 3 months ago I came to
 Sicils at all in nearly 43 it been very
 hard going through life so although very
 em barrased I spoke to a teacher at forest bank
 and TOE BY TOE WAS EXPLAINS TO ME I
 Had a good mentor started very slowly
 once the sounds came and I could put
 4 words together and with the help and
 patience of my mentor I am now blessed
 with a world of reading TOE BY TOE
 is The Best for anyone
 Thank you
 JOHN

I am also going
 To continue with my
 English on Release
 and happily will
 stay out of crime.

In their own words

Clive, mentor, Hollesley Bay

'When I arrived two years ago, I was shocked by the high level of illiteracy among inmates. I soon realised that many were reluctant to reveal their difficulty. My mentee is a Hungarian. After only a few weeks he is starting to understand what people are saying and his frustrations have been halved. The rewards have been boundless.'

PO Lodge, Wandsworth

'I see changes. I have seen a dirty smelly little self-harmer turn into someone clean with self-esteem and a haircut. For the first time in their lives, they feel normal.'

Craig, mentee, Erlestoke

'Toe by Toe has been a big improvement in my reading. It has helped me to understand how to break down letters one by one. I have not finished yet but I could not read and now I can. There are a lot of inmates it could help.'

Officer Healey, Bullingdon

'The change in the guys I see is overwhelming. I see smiles. I see shyness disappear. I see withdrawn men change to confident men. I would like to say thank you for all the lives this is changing – and that includes mine.'

Tom, mentor, Nottingham

'I cannot praise SO Jenkins high enough for his support of Toe by Toe. In fact I think I quite like him which is new for me as I have only suffered screws till now.'

Andrew, mentee, Wandsworth

'I am looking forward to teaching my wife to read. She is keen to learn. We both went to special schools.'

