

# Captive Readers

*Here is a straightforward and very inexpensive scheme for teaching convicts to read.*  
By Christopher Morgan

They say that, depending on your definition of illiteracy, there are between four and six million non-readers in Britain, unable to earn their living by other than the crudest means. It is no surprise that quite a few of these soon find themselves in our prisons, 40% of whose inmates are illiterate.

Some years ago, I joined a pen-friend scheme, run by the Prison Reform Trust, and found myself corresponding with a lifer. What our correspondence revealed about prison life was so disturbing that the letters were published in a book called *The Invisible Crying Tree*.

I did not want to earn money from it and he could not, so we set up a trust to help prisoners prepare for 'the out.' After some hesitation, we decided that the best way would be to launch a literacy scheme. I was advised by the then director of the prison service to take it to Wandsworth. "If it works there," he said, "it will work anywhere."

The idea behind the scheme was to recruit better-educated prisoners to teach illiterate ones in their free time. To make this possible, we donated enough *Toe by Toe* manuals for every teacher and pupil (mentor and mentee) to have one. The lessons were to be short (maximum of 30 minutes), daily, and one-on-one. Seen from the outside, it seemed so simple.

For many reasons, it was not easy at all. One problem was finding volunteer mentors. We did not ask much of them but one thing was to agree to stay in Wandsworth for another year. Well, the top priority for most Wandsworth inmates is usually to get sent somewhere else, anywhere else, as soon as possible.

Then there was the problem of finding mentees. First of all, they could not read the notices we put on the board. Secondly, their main pre-occupation was to hide their inability, not admit to it!

One way and another, we would seem to make a little progress — but then a key mentor would be posted elsewhere or there would be trouble between a mentor and a mentee and everything would collapse. By the spring of 2000, we were near giving up, and I wrote to Wandsworth withdrawing the offer. They asked for one more meeting.

This meeting was attended by a remarkable man called Neil Lodge, an ordinary officer on the VPU (Vulnerable Prisoners Unit for sex offenders, ex-policemen, and others at risk on the main wing). The VPU offered certain advantages because its population is more stable and the VPU prisoners are never allowed out for work or any other reason.

Within weeks, it became clear that what had so long lain dead in the water was now on the move. Neil soon had six mentors and some 20 volunteers as mentees. We found that 20 constituted a critical mass enabling others to overcome their embarrassment.

Keda Cowling, author of *Toe by Toe*, came down from Yorkshire and talked inspirationally to them all. The project has never looked back.

What I, for one, had not anticipated, was the speed of their success. Not all mentees, of course, started from the same level. There were some who found the early stages of the course too easy but, while some might steam along more quickly than others, none was allowed to bypass one line of one lesson.

With very few exceptions, their progress has been phenomenal. Some broke through within months and now, 16 months later, over 40 mentees have graduated joyfully as readers. The total cost to our trust? Fifteen pounds a time. We now have a waiting list of candidate mentees, and several once-troublesome inmates have calmed down.

For me, it is little short of a miracle. It is the same for those taking part. In the summer of 2001, we held a modest ceremony in Wandsworth to hand out the first batch of certificates to the graduates. I found it quite moving, so undisguised was their happiness. One after another came to thank us and plead with us to spread the scheme through the whole prison system.

What is the secret? Well, one is the *Toe by Toe* system. It is a systematic phonics program designed to be used in a buddy system. One of its great virtues is the discipline it imposes on mentor and mentee alike. Together, they must conquer every page. Another is its crystal-clear way of measuring and recording progress, so that the mentee can see how well he's progressing towards his goal.

But I think the real key is the short daily lessons one-on-one. Some years ago, my wife used to help in once-a-week classes for adult illiterates. Having paid for their course, these people really wanted to succeed.

They tried hard, took away homework, were helped by their families — and returned week after week having more or less lost all that they had gained so far. Something newly-learned requires repetition and repetition soon, if it is going to stick.

Anyone who believes in what we are doing and would like to help in any way is most welcome.

*(Adapted with permission from "Teaching Grownups" in the April 2002 newsletter of the UK Reading Reform Foundation, [www.rrf.org.uk](http://www.rrf.org.uk). More information about Toe by Toe is available at <http://www.legend.uk.com/~toebytoe/index.htm>. The American distributor is Ann Hamer, [toebytoe-us@att.net](mailto:toebytoe-us@att.net). 505-661-2344. Mr. Morgan is a grandfather who wants his grandchildren to learn to read without stress and enjoy happy, literate lives. He lives in the UK.)*