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∨ Menu

[Home](#) > [Education, training and skills](#) > [Further and higher education, skills and vocational training](#)
> [Education in prisons](#) > [Prison education: a review of reading education in prisons](#)

[Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Prisons](#)

[Ofsted](#)

Research and analysis

Prison education: a review of reading education in prisons

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[Contents](#)

[Forewords](#)

[Executive summary](#)

[Introduction](#)

[Context](#)

[Reading education is not given sufficient priority in the prison regime](#)

[Much education provision was not organised in a way that supports prisoners to improve their reading](#)

[The curriculum was not well designed to improve reading](#)

[Prisoners with the greatest need to improve their reading generally received the least support](#)

[Recommendations arising from the research](#)


[Methodology](#)

[Limitations](#)

[Annex A](#)

[Annex B](#)

[Print or save to PDF](#)

 [Print this page](#)

Forewords

From Amanda Spielman, Her Majesty's Chief Inspector, Ofsted

I am pleased to introduce our review of reading education in prisons, which we carried out jointly with Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Prisons (HMIP). HMIP and Ofsted have long been concerned about the standards of education in our prisons. Education is key to success in life, and for no one is that truer than for prisoners.

We have been particularly worried about the number of prisoners who are simply unable to read. Reading is a fundamental life skill. We know from our school inspections that children who struggle to read fall behind quickly and become disillusioned with education, and that this sometimes leads to issues with behaviour and exclusions.

It is the same sad story with prisoners. Lack of access to education maintains inequality and seriously curtails a prisoner's life chances, whereas improving reading skills can, of itself, improve employability and give access to other educational opportunities that will also improve the prisoner's prospects after prison. Being able to read is also valuable for its own sake.

Prison leaders will recognise the difference that reading for pleasure can make to a prisoner's quality of life. This is especially true for those on long sentences. However, prisons are not giving the right priority to improving prisoners' reading skills. Leaders do need to ensure that prisons are safe and that prisoners' health and welfare needs are met, but they must also find a way to improve

the basic reading skills of the huge proportion of prisoners who currently lack them.

Every prison leader should want prisoners to leave having improved their reading skills significantly. The prison system should be focused on quality teaching that gives prisoners a secure reading ability that they can apply both inside and outside of prison.

This research shines some light on the reading education that prisoners are getting, or to be more precise, in most cases, the lack of it. There are some serious systemic challenges, as well as plenty of poor practice. I want Ofsted, with the prison service and wider government leaders, to be part of the solution to this enduring and enormous problem.

From Charlie Taylor, Her Majesty's Chief Inspector, HMIP

At a cost to the taxpayer of around £45,000 each year, it is astonishing that prisoners can serve their sentence without being taught to read or to improve their reading skills. Yet this is the depressing finding of this joint thematic report between HMIP and Ofsted. We know that many prisoners have had a disrupted schooling and that high numbers cannot read at all or are functionally illiterate, so it is very disappointing that this essential skill is given such a low profile in prisons.

The way contracts for education providers are used does not incentivise the teaching of reading, because the focus is skewed towards achieving level 1 qualifications. Prisoners who cannot read are passed on to third sector organisations, such as the Shannon Trust, which train prisoner mentors to support their peers. However, this work is not prioritised in prisons and is often not possible because prisoners are locked away in their cells. While the pandemic may have compounded some of these difficulties, the lack of time prisoners spend out of their cells has been an issue that has been raised by HMIP for many years.

This report also highlights the lack of effective assessments of prisoners' reading abilities and a routine failure to pass information between prisons. Most concerning of all is that so few teachers know how to teach prisoners to read, resources are inadequate and there are no meaningful measures of progress.

The failure to teach prisoners to read or to extend the literacy of poor readers is a huge missed opportunity. It means many prisoners do not get the benefits of reading while in prison. And it means that many will fail to learn the essential skills that will help them to resettle, get work and make a success of their lives when they are released.

It is a serious indictment of the prison system that so many prisoners are no better at reading when they leave prison than when they arrived. The prison service, governors and education providers

should take urgent action to address the many concerns we have raised in this report.

Executive summary

Following concerns about the poor state of prison education,^[footnote 1] Ofsted and HMIP decided to find out how prisoners are helped to improve their reading skills. Specifically, we sought to understand how prisoners' reading is assessed, what provision is in place and how much progress prisoners make.

We jointly visited 6 prisons to carry out this research. Our findings are based on interviews with senior prison leaders, leaders in the education department, teachers, librarians, prison officers and prisoners. We reviewed curriculum plans and assessment data, visited classrooms, education departments and prison libraries, and spoke to prisoners in their residential units.

Our study highlights the systemic barriers that prevent prisoners from receiving effective support to acquire or improve their reading skills. The design and implementation of the curriculum were not focused on teaching prisoners to read or developing their reading and literacy skills. Importantly, the prisoners with the greatest need generally received the least support.

Main findings

Reading education is not given sufficient priority in the prison regime.

We found that:

- reading is not a distinct part of the core education offer
- leaders focused on qualifications that were not suitable for half of the prison population
- early reading provision in prisons relies heavily on voluntary organisations to deliver it
- assessments for identifying prisoners' specific learning needs and gaps in reading knowledge were inappropriate
- leaders do not have effective systems to identify and address prisoners' reading needs

Much education provision was not organised in a way that supports prisoners to improve their reading.

We found that:

- prisoners had as little as an hour a day out of their cells and few were let out to take part in education
- prisoners were often paid more to work than to attend classroom education
- libraries were rarely used to give prisoners opportunities to practise reading

The curriculum was not well designed to improve reading.

We found that:

- prisons offered a narrow curriculum, with a focus on teaching prisoners to pass qualifications
- many teaching staff did not know how to teach adults to read
- many resources to help prisoners practise reading were unsuitable for adults learning to read

Prisoners with the greatest need to improve their reading generally received the least support.

Introduction

Ofsted inspects the overall effectiveness of education, skills and work in prisons and young offender institutions (YOIs) as part of HMIP's joint inspections of prisons. [\[footnote 2\]](#)

When we carried out research into prison education in 2008, we found that several aspects of it were poor. [\[footnote 3\]](#) For example, curriculums did not take account of what prisoners had learned before, records of prisoners' learning were not transferred between prisons and assessments of prisoners' educational needs on entry were often inaccurate or not used. Sadly, our new study has found that there has been little progress in the last 14 years.

We recently published a commentary which concluded that prison education is still in a poor state.^[footnote 4] As a result, Ofsted and HMIP called for prison education to be given much greater attention. We committed to carrying out a year-long review of prison education, which included this research into reading in prisons.

Prisoners have much lower levels of literacy than the general population. The most recent data published by the Ministry of Justice shows that 57% of adult prisoners taking initial assessments had literacy levels below those expected of an 11-year-old.^[footnote 5]

Low reading ability limits prisoners' ability to navigate life in prison. For example, they may struggle to access written information, such as family and legal correspondence, menus or faith-based texts, and struggle to fill out forms. This makes them more vulnerable and puts them at risk of becoming isolated. It also prevents them from fully participating in the purposeful activities available in the prison such as education or work. If they cannot read proficiently, their time in prison, especially during long sentences, can become even more challenging and unproductive.

A lack of reading skills also limits prisoners' ability to navigate life after prison. Prisoners without employment-related skills and knowledge are likely to find it more difficult to access opportunities for rehabilitation and resettlement on release. For example, completing forms to open a bank account and applying for jobs, education or training become difficult or impossible tasks. This may make it less likely that they will get into work and more likely that they will reoffend.

In prisons, reading education is currently delivered through wider English classes. These include functional skills classes, which teach the core skills required for employment and independent living. These classes include speaking and listening, reading and writing. Reading skills are also included as part of English for speakers of other languages (ESOL) classes, which teach those whose first language is not English to read in English. When prisoners cannot read at all, a voluntary programme to teach reading is sometimes available, at the discretion of the governor.

Since 2018, functional skills qualification content has included a greater focus on the theory behind how you learn to read. Prisoners need to have learned, securely, the underpinning knowledge in reading in order to read well. For example, to read menus, letters from family or legal correspondence, prisoners need to have knowledge of the fundamental blocks that make up learning to read.

Part of the purpose of entry level functional skills is to teach reading.^[footnote 6] The Department for Education's guidance explains that this should be done through the use of phonics.^[footnote 7] Prisoners need to be systematically taught the relationship between letters and sounds.

When functional skills English programmes are not taught well or do not use the best methods for teaching adults to read, prisoners are less likely to develop expertise or enjoyment in reading in its own right.

We expect to see that learners are being taught the fundamental building blocks of English, including how to read. In functional skills classes, as in any English curriculum, we want teachers to encourage learners to enjoy learning to read. They should have the opportunity to apply their reading skills across their life, including through reading whole books.

This report sets out the current barriers to improving prisoners' reading skills and challenges the government and the prison service urgently to find solutions.

Context

Prisons are complex organisations and prison leaders, especially governors, have multiple and competing priorities. The safety of prisoners and staff is understandably of uppermost importance, as are maintaining standards of cleanliness and ensuring that prisoners are treated decently and humanely. These standards were especially relevant during the COVID-19 pandemic in order to reduce the spread of infection. Governors were obliged to respond to the pandemic by minimising the movement of people around the prison, reducing the time prisoners were allowed out of their cells and confining social 'bubbles' to the residential units.

Governors have limited resources and have to make difficult choices. Allocating the time, space and staff needed for widespread education to take place in prisons is not easy. However, we visited one prison that had overcome these difficulties, where all prisoners were expected to take part in out-of-cell education. Where taking part in education is the norm, it is because senior leaders within individual prisons have made a conscious decision to prioritise it.

In most prisons, face-to-face education was only available for a very small number of prisoners. We also heard of long delays in prisoners being able to enrol on education courses. This was despite the easing of the government's COVID-19 restrictions.

Reading education is not given sufficient priority in the prison regime

Reading is not a distinct part of the core education offer

The core education offer is commissioned by Her Majesty's Prison and Probation Service (HMPPS) centrally and is set up for prisoners to gain qualifications.^[footnote 8] This includes those in English, mathematics and information and communication technology. These qualifications were designed to equip post-16 learners with the English and mathematics skills they need to progress into employment.

The core education offer does not include a distinct reading curriculum for its own sake. Yet there are many prisoners who would benefit from gaining and developing their reading skills. Staff told us that much of the prison population can read a bit, but not well.

Governors, too, had largely overlooked the need to help prisoners become functionally literate in their prisons. However, they acknowledged that improving prisoners' reading skills gives them better access to education, and that this has been shown to reduce reoffending.^[footnote 9]

Education leaders did not have a strategy for developing teaching staff. Training in using phonics to teach reading was extremely limited, where it happened at all. Although some trained teachers had some idea how to teach reading, they had not been given appropriate training.

Although English courses could have been made available, education leaders had not made this happen. In most prisons, fewer than 30 prisoners were enrolled in any form of English education,^[footnote 10] which represented a very small proportion of the prisoners who would have benefited from this. We found that very little reading education was taking place during our visits or had happened in the recent past.

Similarly, most of the prisons we visited did not prioritise beginner-level courses that could have taught early reading.^[footnote 11] One prisoner, who was very motivated to improve his reading so that he could apply for jobs, told us he had waited months for reading support.

Where prisons did teach early reading, leaders had not ensured that teaching took account of best practice in teaching adults to read. They also did not put in place a reputable structured phonics programme to develop prisoners' reading skills. This was despite phonics programmes being recommended in the functional skills syllabus to provide a systematic approach that teaches learners how to recognise letters and blend sounds to read words.^[footnote 12]

Leaders focused on qualifications that were not suitable for half of the prison population

Prison leaders and education managers focus most of their efforts on helping prisoners to gain English qualifications rather than making sure they can read well.

Each prison sets a target number of prisoners to enrol on these courses as part of contractual

obligations. Education leaders told us that these targets were based on an analysis of prisoners' needs. Yet sometimes, there did not appear to be a clear reason for enrolment. It appeared that prisons focused on contractual obligations more than reading needs. For example, a teacher told us that she had been told to register 8 prisoners and had to go to the residential units and find prisoners willing to enrol.

“ I don't [prioritise which prisoners enrol on courses]; administration do that. I don't get the data. Over COVID, I got told my targets and then I'd go out to the wings.”

(Teacher)

Leaders focused on the level 1 qualification in functional skills in particular. This qualification enables prisoners to access work-based opportunities in prison, and leaders are set a target number of prisoners to achieve it. Most prisoners who were taking part in education were undertaking a level 1 qualification.

Gaining an English language qualification, such as functional skills at level 1, is appropriate and useful for some prisoners. However, it is only suitable for those who can already read. The level 1 course focuses on understanding texts. Prisoners who cannot read or who struggle with reading will not be able to access this curriculum, and so will not gain the qualification.

“ There is not enough effort on the lower levels of reading. When prisoners are transferred here they are given an assessment. Once you know their assessed levels, you can place them on the relevant course. The governor wants everyone to be at least level 1. Some workshops require you to have a level 2, such as engineering or industrial cleaning.”

(Learning and skills manager)

The level 1 course was, in fact, unsuitable for many prisoners. Prison staff told us that up to 50% of the prison population could not read well enough to take part in functional skills courses at level 1 or above. [\[footnote 13\]](#) Prisoners with lower levels of reading ability, who were unlikely to achieve this qualification, were largely ignored. Evidence submitted to Ofsted by the University and College Union concluded similarly that contractual obligations detract from providing good education. [\[footnote 14\]](#) Education contracts appear to incentivise enrolment on certain qualifications over learning.

Early reading provision in prisons relies heavily on voluntary organisations to deliver it

Teaching of prisoners who could not read was usually left to the Shannon Trust, a voluntary organisation that trains prisoners to mentor fellow prisoners who are learning to read.

The Shannon Trust uses an appropriately structured and sequenced programme designed specifically for teaching prisoners. It uses age-appropriate books and texts and is overseen by an external regional Shannon Trust coordinator. The programme is available in many prisons, and mentors have been trained using the training manuals and DVDs provided.

The Shannon Trust's programme is intended for prisoners who cannot read. Indeed, education leaders told us that the Shannon Trust was the main vehicle for teaching those who cannot read in their prisons.

“ We have the Shannon Trust and entry level for the weakest learners. Initial assessment identifies who goes to the Shannon Trust and who goes to entry level.”

(Learning and skills manager)

There are several benefits of using the Shannon Trust, which were explained to us during our visits. For example:

- prisoners who train as mentors can build supportive relationships with prisoners who cannot read
- prisoners felt at ease with the Shannon Trust mentors because they receive one-to-one support in their residential units instead of in classes
- prisoners felt a certain amount of stigma about learning to read and felt that learning with the mentors offered more confidentiality

But importantly, the Shannon Trust is not contracted by HMPPS to provide reading education as part of the core education offer. It has only recently been possible for prison leaders to use their limited funding to commission the programme.

Although leaders said that the Shannon Trust programme is the main way that prisoners learn to read, the programme was not integrated with the English curriculum at any level. Prison leaders and managers did not communicate or liaise with mentors or the charity's coordinators. There was little, if any, coordination between teaching staff and Shannon Trust mentors on the assessment or progress of those being mentored.

Shannon Trust mentoring, as with all of the core education offer, stopped for a time during the first national COVID-19 lockdown. Once the restrictions were eased, prisoners were able to leave their cells for work such as wing cleaning, inducting new arrivals and acting as orderlies on segregation units. However, at the time of our visits there had been little or no attempt to restart Shannon Trust mentoring. It was simply not a priority for wing staff or leaders, and there was very little evidence of mentors being able to deliver the programme. In all the prisons we visited, the Shannon Trust programme was much slower to be reintroduced than functional skills courses.

Where the programme could take place, it was only possible in the very limited association time

(which could be as little as an hour) that prisoners had out of their cells. This led to prisoners and staff expressing frustration that, despite having trained mentors in place, it was not possible for them to teach fellow prisoners to read.

“ I’ve spoken to a few too; the thing is that they’re willing to learn, just not on association [time]... I’m happy giving up my association, as long as I get my shower, but my learners don’t want to.”

(Shannon Trust mentor)

A common complaint we heard from mentors was that they did not have a suitable space to work with prisoners. Some delivered the programme in their cells, which was not conducive to learning:

“ Also, my cell’s tiny; you can only just about fit two people in there let alone lay things out and start writing.”

(Shannon Trust mentor)

We also saw examples of resources, provided by charities, that aimed to help develop reading skills and encourage reading. These included:

- the Diffusion scheme, which provides texts that help adult learners to develop their reading skills, with content that is relevant to adults in prison
- the Reading Agency’s ‘Reading Ahead Challenge’, which encourages prisoners to read 6 books and rewards them with a dictionary
- the Storybook Mums and Storybook Dads scheme, which encourages prisoners to record themselves reading a story for their children to hear

Prisoners and teachers spoke of the positive impact of initiatives such as these. However, the frequency with which these took place varied considerably between prisons. They were usually driven by the enthusiasm of one member of staff rather than encouraged by leaders, managers and prison staff as part of a whole-prison approach.

This means that many prisoners did not have the opportunity to learn to read or improve their reading skills. When they did, this relied on charitable or voluntary organisations. Prisoners’ reading skills were not developed as a matter of routine because early reading was not implemented systematically as part of a core offer.

Assessments for identifying prisoners’ specific learning needs and gaps in reading knowledge were inappropriate

The English assessment that all prisoners take when they first enter a prison is intended to make sure that they are offered the right English functional skills course. It is not intended to assess whether or how well the prisoner can read. The assessment does not give leaders or teachers information on which prisoners struggle with reading or on the precise knowledge and skills gaps that might limit their reading ability.

In the prisons we visited, there was no routine phonics screening assessment to identify whether a prisoner could read or how the curriculum needed to be planned to fill specific gaps in knowledge and skills. Only one teaching staff member, who had previously worked as a primary school teacher, carried out her own phonics screening assessment. This was not replicated across the prison education department, which meant that only a very few prisoners benefited.

Instead, the assessment tests the skills that learners need to access functional skills courses, such as how to identify bias, skim read text and fill in missing letters of words. Concerningly, this test asks prisoners to state whether they have a certain skill rather than actually testing how well they can use it. For example, one question on the form asks if the prisoner finds filling in forms difficult. This question is then followed by many more pages to complete. These approaches are, at best, substitutes for assessments of knowledge and skills. They often measure prisoners' confidence rather than their actual knowledge and skills. Teachers and education managers told us that prisoners who struggled with reading found these tests hard to complete, but they had been unable to come up with an alternative.

This type of assessment does not help leaders or teachers to identify whether learners have difficulty with reading. Many prisoners have poor reading skills, and the gaps in knowledge and skills could be very different from one person to another. The assessments failed to unpick these differences. For example, the different reasons a learner may struggle to skim read text could include poor fluency or a limited vocabulary. Understanding these differences is fundamental to supporting older readers, who will have different needs. [\[footnote 15\]](#)

Jake was in care before arriving in prison. He told us that he couldn't write and could only read very basic books, because he skipped school when he was younger.

After completing an initial assessment, he was placed on an entry level 2 course. Initially, he found the course difficult and struggled with anxiety in group classes: 'I was very shy, but I thought "only me got me into this and only me can get myself out."' So, he signed up to the Shannon Trust programme to be mentored one-to-one. With this extra support, he was able to gain entry level 2 and 3 qualifications and was studying for his level 1 when we spoke to him.

Jake's goal is to get a job cutting hair, which he described as his passion. Once he has gained a level 1 qualification in English, he will be able to enrol on a barbering course and get the qualification he needs to pursue this goal on release. When we asked him why he decided to

learn to read, he told us: ‘You’ve got to better yourself. I don’t want to be back in a dead-end situation.’

Leaders do not have effective systems to identify and address prisoners’ reading needs

In all the prisons we visited, systems to assess prisoners’ reading ability, identify their reading needs, implement solutions and monitor progress were largely absent.

Despite the existence of a central database, we were told of examples where information about prisoners’ education was not kept in a consistent way, was missing or was not accessible when they moved prisons. This included information as basic as whether a prisoner:

- had taken an education assessment previously
- was enrolled in education
- was receiving education
- had achieved an English language qualification

In order to build on previous learning, teachers must have information about what education a prisoner has received in previous prisons, as well as any qualifications they have attained. But we were told that this information is not routinely shared. The database that is intended to share information about prisoners’ education was not widely used. [\[footnote 16\]](#)

Additionally, we were told that information on a prisoner’s qualifications can only be sent to another prison if the prisoner ticks the relevant boxes for sharing personal information. One curriculum manager told us this rule is not made clear to prisoners and many do not understand the implications of this decision. As prisoners can move prison at very short notice, it can be difficult to have useful and timely information for a new prisoner.

Every prisoner should complete an initial English skills assessment, which is the same across all prisons. However, if information is not shared when prisoners are transferred, it’s possible that the prisoner will complete the same assessments several times. Leaders also told us that many prisoners had yet to complete this assessment.

“ Interviewer: When you arrived at this prison, did you have an initial assessment?”

“ Learner 2 (prisoner): Well no, I don’t think so. To be honest I was a bit confused. I did that test in the other prison and they lost it and then I did it again. When I got here I told them I already filled in that form. I told the officers, tried to let them know. But they said they didn’t

have it. About two months after I arrived I did the exact same one in English and maths. I think I've done the same one three times. But they don't know what I have; they say they haven't got it."

Prisoners who have recently arrived in a jail are often anxious or distracted. They may not be in the right state of mind to carry out an assessment. This means that the data that prisons do collect on reading and literacy is unlikely to be accurate; although, positively, one prison was aware that some prisoners would be rehabilitating from drug misuse and arranged for their initial assessment to take place at a time when their medication was most effective.

As a result of COVID-19 restrictions, in many prisons assessment materials were posted to prisoners in their cells. We were told that, because prisoners usually need to attain level 1 to be able to get a job, some of those who could not read were getting cellmates to complete the form.

All of the teachers and education leaders we spoke to had serious concerns about the accuracy of the initial assessment. This was largely due to the way it was administered.

Leaders did not appear to have an accurate measure of how many prisoners were receiving English or reading education. For example, one prison counted the number of learners who had received a letter saying they had a place on a course, even though they were not due to start the course until several months later. Another measured enrolment by simply sending a pack to a prisoner, without following up to find out if the course had been started or completed. These measures did not tell leaders whether prisoners had actually received education or learned anything.

We also saw very few examples of leaders and education managers monitoring how well prisoners were learning to read on their courses. Instead, they mostly focused on basic tracking of the number of prisoners achieving each qualification in English functional skills.

Importantly, any information on the progress that learners were making while learning to read was extremely limited. This was one of the key areas that we aimed to carry out research on, yet the lack of information recorded about it meant that we could not find out how much progress a prisoner was making.

Consequently, leaders and education managers did not have the necessary information to even begin to address prisoners' reading needs.

Much education provision was not organised in a way that supports prisoners to improve their reading

Prisoners had as little as an hour a day out of their cells and few were let out to take part in education

At the time of our visits, prisoners had as little as an hour a day out of their cells. [\[footnote 17\]](#) During this time, prisoners had to fit in daily tasks such as exercising, having a shower, collecting meals, submitting written applications, making phone calls and doing laundry.

“ On association you’re grabbing lunch, you’ve got to clean your cell, do laundry, shower, have a little walk around, any paperwork. In an hour and 45 minutes.”

(Prisoner)

Prisoners commented that they were not keen to use the limited time out of their cells to take part in education.

In most prisons, teachers, mentors and tutors could not move around the different residential units. In these prisons, the only face-to-face education available was a small number of English classes, or vocational training and industrial workshops. We were told of education classes that took place outside of association time, although we saw very few of these happening.

Lessons had to fit around the rest of the prison day. This led to some lessons being much too long. For example, some lessons consisted of two 3-hour sessions across the day. In one of the prisons we visited, teachers were running 20-minute sessions on English and mathematics during industry workshops. Sometimes, the length of lessons depended on the availability of prison staff to escort prisoners around the jail.

However, in one prison it was clear that the deployment of teachers was based more on prisoners’ learning needs than on other factors in the prison regime. For example, during lockdown, when classes could not take place, each teacher taught prisoners in their cells. They also reduced lesson time of an individual lesson from 3 hours to 75 minutes. They found this to be a positive approach, as it was more conducive to learning and enabled education to take place outside of association time.

Some prisons were so short-staffed they could not facilitate education at all. For example, one prison only let prisoners who were employed in cleaning out of their cell beyond their limited association time. In addition, contact with teachers doing outreach on the residential units could only be facilitated during the short time prisoners were allowed out of their cells. Prisoners therefore had limited access to education, and it was difficult for prisoners to be allocated an allotted time when they could learn.

Prisoners told us that association time was the only opportunity for Shannon Trust mentors to work with their fellow prisoners. This meant that they often missed out on other opportunities, such as gym visits. We saw only one prison that gave mentors time and space to work with prisoners on the Shannon Trust programme out of their cells.

Prisoners were often paid more to work than to attend classroom education

Prisoners are paid for each work and education session they complete. They were generally not able to attend a combination of work and education, so had to choose between the two. Work opportunities included cleaning, cooking, recycling, waste processing and laundry. Some of the prisoners we spoke to were able to earn more by working because the rate of pay was higher or because the work sessions were longer than those in education. Even those prisoners who wanted to be peer mentors for the Shannon Trust could earn more money by working in the kitchen.

Jane had been in prison for 2 and a half years. After completing an initial assessment, she was placed on an entry-level functional skills course. She gained her entry level 3 qualification, which sparked her desire to learn. In addition to starting level 1 English, she also signed up for mathematics and IT courses. This meant Jane was now classed as being in full-time education and deemed unable to work according to the prison's rules. She had to choose between education and work. As work was better paid, she dropped two of her courses and continued only with English. She told us she would like to do a level 2 mathematics qualification, but that she'd probably stick at level 1 so that she could work.

Although all the prisons we visited had reopened commercial workshops, where prisoners make products that can be sold, they had not made education classes more widely available for prisoners.

“ Our textiles workshops, for example, have targets to produce a certain amount; those targets will always come first.”

(Governor)

Governors have a devolved responsibility for setting the prisoner pay for taking part in education. Although the Coates Review recommended that governors should be free to encourage education through increased pay, this was not always happening in practice. [\[footnote 18\]](#)

Libraries were rarely used to give prisoners opportunities to practise reading

Since the COVID-19 pandemic began, leaders have been slow to reopen libraries, and opening hours have been much reduced. At the time of our visits, most were closed due to the pandemic, or only open for short periods of time during the day. Libraries were rarely open in the evening or at weekends.

Sometimes library opening times clashed with education sessions. Opportunities to use the libraries were extremely limited for prisoners who were working. If a prisoner's scheduled library visit clashed with their working hours, it would be missed.

Teachers told us that staffing shortages caused by the pandemic made escorting prisoners to the library even more difficult. In one prison, prisoners had to fill out a form to order a book, restricting access for those who could not write.

Despite staff shortages and limited library opening times, some prisons ensured that libraries facilitated reading. For example, one prison moved a selection of books to the residential units so that prisoners could access these while still in their 'bubbles'. In one prison, teachers escorted their learners to the library during lessons so that they could pick appropriate books. In another, a teacher picked up and returned books for her learners in her own time. Two libraries were used for the Shannon Trust programme.

Libraries are important for supporting those with some reading skills to improve their reading. The most requested book in prison was the dictionary. Needing a dictionary shows a willingness to learn and a recognition of the importance of literacy.

Where libraries were accessible, they were used in a range of positive ways to encourage prisoners to read for pleasure. We saw reading initiatives such as a challenge where, if prisoners read 6 books, they received a dictionary. The Storybook Dads scheme was also held in some libraries. This initiative helps prisoners to record bedtime stories or messages for their children. Libraries were also used for book clubs. In one prison, prisoners earned money for taking part in a book club run by the librarian. Over 10 prisoners took part each month, but it was available to any prisoner who wanted to join.

We met librarians who were passionate about their work and encouraged reading for both pleasure and purpose. In one, individuals worked hard to make sure they stocked resources that were appropriate for different levels of reading ability. In another, the librarian was able to provide a wider range of books through partnering with a local authority library. We also heard about author visits, book clubs and creative writing opportunities.

However, we saw limited communication between prison education departments and libraries to align what the library could offer with the education programmes available.

Although there were occasions when prison libraries were used well, the practical constraints around opening libraries meant that many did not help or encourage prisoners to practise their reading.

The curriculum was not well designed to improve reading

Prisons offered a narrow curriculum, with a focus on teaching prisoners to pass qualifications

The strong focus on achieving English functional skills qualifications rather than learning to read was evident in the narrow curriculum we saw in the prisons we visited. Across all the functional skills courses, the curriculum was designed to enable prisoners to practise for the exams. It did not focus on acquiring the skills to become a fluent reader.

When we asked teachers and leaders in the education department what goals they had for reading, almost all of them gave a similar answer:

“ To get them through their exam. That’s the main goal.”

(Education manager)

Teachers made frequent use of text extracts rather than whole books to replicate exams. Lessons focused on comprehension and neglected the basic building blocks necessary for learning to read. This meant there were not enough opportunities to practise or improve reading.

‘Teaching to the test’ means that prisoners may not be able to apply their reading skills to unfamiliar situations, outside of an exam. Prisoners may not learn to read texts that would help them in their daily lives, while inside prison or after release. In most prisons, teaching and curriculum were only planned to achieve the end goal of passing a qualification at level 1.

Many teaching staff did not know how to teach adults to read

As part of the English curriculum in prisons, learners can take a number of functional skills qualifications at different levels: level 1 or level 2 and entry levels 1, 2 and 3. Entry levels are for beginner learners who are not yet ready for level 1. Entry-level courses would be the most

appropriate for teaching early reading.

However, the teaching we saw did not focus on reading. Teaching at entry levels did not make sure that prisoners had a secure understanding of the basics of reading. It did not focus on identifying and addressing gaps in prisoners' reading knowledge or skills.

Few teaching staff had the subject knowledge and training to know how to teach reading. Some we spoke to did not have a teaching qualification or even any previous experience of teaching. Course materials did not demonstrate their understanding of how to use phonics to teach prisoners to read.

Teaching focused on repeating short tasks, with an assumption that this would improve learners' ability to read words and sentences and understand short pieces of text. Other tasks involved the use of phonics without teachers understanding the need to teach it in a systematic order.

Teachers did not know which resources would be appropriate to teach phonics and early reading. This was especially evident when they provided written resources for prisoners who could not read well enough to use them.

Teachers did not have an accurate picture of prisoners' initial reading ability nor the progress they had made. This, combined with teachers' lack of subject knowledge, time, space and a suitable curriculum, meant that many prisoners did not get the opportunities to learn to read or to develop their reading skills.

Many resources to help prisoners practise reading were unsuitable for adults learning to read

Prisoners who were learning to read or improving their reading were frequently given resources that were of little help to them.

Prisons often provided education packs that could be completed in the prisoner's cell. All of these packs demanded some reading ability. They were far too difficult for some prisoners to be able to read or understand. For most prisoners during lockdowns, this was the only education available. Teaching staff told us that many prisoners who struggled to read well found the packs hard to complete.

As one teacher told us, learning to read requires face-to-face teaching. Staff told us:

“ You can't teach phonics through a cell door.”

Some books and worksheets were those that would be used to teach young children and so had limited appeal for adult prisoners. Where appropriate books were provided (for example, by the

charity Diffusion), there were rarely enough to go round. Tutors commented that they did not always read books aloud in classes because there were 'no materials short enough'.

Prisoners told us that sometimes when they requested books from the library, they were sent something completely different. One prison provided 'reading pens', which read out text as they pass over it. However, prison leaders did not always ensure they were useful for prisoners; for example, the font in the menus in this prison was not compatible with the pens.

Some teachers spoke of the benefits of using in-cell education packs in addition to teaching, which had been introduced during the pandemic. They said they planned to continue to use them when restrictions were lifted. This meant that those prisoners who could read and learn independently could carry on their education in their own time in their cells, rather than relying on just face-to-face classes.

In one prison, a teacher told us that they were discouraged from reading from a book to prisoners during workshops. This meant that teachers resorted to worksheets for prisoners to complete, and the opportunity to demonstrate how reading a book could be enjoyable as well as instructional was missed.

Where we did hear of times when prisoners were supported to learn to read, this was largely because of the actions of a single enthusiastic member of staff.

Anne had never been to school when she arrived in prison at 53 years old. She could not read or write but was too embarrassed to seek help: 'You don't want everyone else to know your demons'. When she received an initial assessment to complete remotely, she paid her cellmate with vapes to do it for her. This meant she could apply for work, and she got a job in industrial cleaning. Her supervisor was the first to notice she couldn't read. Her supervisor referred her to an additional learning support officer, who had previously been a primary school teacher.

The learning support officer did a phonics screening assessment and gave Anne a DVD that had a phonics course on it. She told us how valuable she found this intervention: 'I can't say enough good things about what they've done. It's all about pushing what you can do. When I had the DVDs, I could do the practise myself. I don't have to rush anything. I can make mistakes and check them in my room – I can talk to myself in my room, take it slowly, write it down. Then you can help yourself, you don't get the demons... I couldn't read, now I can read.'

Since learning to read, Anne has gained all the entry-level English qualifications and was studying for level 1 when we spoke to her. She had also been able to get a job in textiles and had started a course in digital skills. She told us about the difference that reading had made in her life: 'I can write to my son now; he says "Mum, I'm so proud of you." ... When you're in the travelling community, it's all about the children, and the cleaning. You look after everyone else,

that's the way, you don't go to school, you keep the house, you keep everyone clean and fed. This is about me; this is my time and now I know I'll go out of here better. It shows you the bigger picture, I'm more confident now.'

Overall, little thought has been given to providing resources for prisoners to use to help them learn to read or improve their reading skills. This meant very limited chances for prisoners to develop their reading skills.

Prisoners with the greatest need to improve their reading generally received the least support

Fundamentally, the lack of distinct reading education as part of prisons' core education offer means there is limited provision for those prisoners with the greatest need.

The education system in prisons encourages leaders to focus on qualifications in functional skills rather than on improving reading. This qualification-driven approach has meant that the prison system has overlooked providing education for those prisoners who cannot read. Instead, a voluntary organisation, the Shannon Trust, is often the only way prisoners who cannot read are taught.

Our evidence suggests that the prison regime lacks the systems to identify and address prisoners' reading needs. In particular, without an appropriate screening assessment, prisoners who cannot read or who cannot read well will not receive the support they need. If reading is not given due priority, prisoners with the greatest need to improve their reading will be left behind.

Very few prisoners have had opportunities to learn to read or improve their reading skills, and the lack of face-to-face education has hit those who cannot read at all the hardest. We know from our previous research, before COVID-19, that limited provision for reading was the norm.^{[[footnote 19](#)]} The pandemic appears to have exacerbated an existing problem. Prisoners who cannot read at all need face-to-face teaching; they are unable to make improvements on their own or by practising reading. Through the pandemic and beyond, there has often been no-one available in residential units to offer help and support for prisoners with their education courses. With limited time out of cells and a lack of help when trying to complete in-cell education packs, very little learning has been possible for those prisoners who need help with learning to read fluently.

Where prisons have focused on practise for exams and teaching to the test, prisoners who can read a little but not fluently have been disadvantaged. They may not be able to apply their reading skills to unfamiliar situations outside of an exam, or to read texts in their daily lives, while inside

prison or after release.

It is essential that reading is better understood as an essential part of English qualifications in prison. Where the curriculum was not focused on reading or delivered by expert staff, those prisoners who need to improve their reading did not receive the teaching they needed. Those with the greatest need to improve their reading need appropriate books and texts to learn from, but we saw a lack of suitable resources. The curriculum and teaching need to help prisoners to enjoy reading for its own sake and become more confident in being able to read in their daily lives.

Recommendations arising from the research

For HMPPS

The education, skills and work offer should include:

- initial and ongoing assessments that pinpoint the specific knowledge and skills in reading that prisoners are missing or need to improve
- a distinct part of the curriculum offer dedicated to teaching reading
- specialist training and development on teaching adults to read

For prison governors

Governors should lead a whole-prison approach to reading that facilitates reading for pleasure, purpose and rehabilitation. This would include:

- having an ambitious strategy to improve prisoners' reading skills
- making sure the library promotes reading for pleasure and purpose effectively and provides appropriate texts for adults who are learning to read
- using appropriate interventions that support reading as well as systems to assess, monitor and share information on prisoners' reading ability and the progress they make

How Ofsted and HMIP will respond

During inspections, Ofsted will include a focus on the quality of reading education and support for those who are learning to read. We will do so regardless of whether this is commissioned as part of the core education offer.

HMIP will continue to inspect library provision and will consider its focus on how effectively libraries promote reading and how they support the prison's wider reading strategy.

Methodology

This review sought to understand how prisoners' reading ability is assessed, what provision is made to improve their reading and how much progress they make.

We carried out 6 research visits to prisons. For an in-depth, qualitative study of this kind, our visits enabled us to describe in detail the situation in these prisons and highlight themes from across them.

Research visits were carried out by an Ofsted schools Her Majesty's Inspector (HMI) with a specialism in reading, an HMIP consultant reading specialist, and an Ofsted further education and skills HMI with experience of inspecting prisons.

Participation in the research visits was voluntary. For convenience, we used a sample of prisons that were scheduled for inspection. We visited 4 adult male prisons and 2 female prisons. The male prisons had all been graded requires improvement for education, work and skills at their last full inspection, whereas the 2 female prisons we visited had been graded good. We visited prisons with a mix of security categorisations. Two prisons were privately managed.

We carried out deep dives into reading, which included observations of English classes where these were happening.^{[[footnote 20](#)]} We interviewed leaders, those involved in delivering reading education^{[[footnote 21](#)]} and prisoners engaged in education. We also visited the prison library and reviewed curriculum plans and assessment data. See Annex A for a list of the job roles of those we spoke to.

Following each visit, the anonymous notes of each interview were typed up into a structured template. In addition to evidence gathered on our research visits, we drew on the combined expertise of Ofsted and HMIP's inspectors, who provided feedback on our findings. Interview responses were then coded thematically using coding software. At the final stage of analysis, the coded responses were compared across all 6 visits. We changed the names of individuals described in case examples.

Limitations

The findings from such a small sample are not generalisable across the whole prison estate. There may be prisons that have prioritised reading education and, in particular, the needs of those who cannot read at all, outside of our sample.

Although we had aimed for observations of education to be a significant part of our deep dives, we could not observe much education at all. We were able to observe teaching of functional skills (from entry level 3 to levels 1 and 2) in 2 out of the 6 prisons we visited.

The visits took place while many prisons were subject to pandemic-related restrictions on the range of education, skills and work activities that could take place. The restrictions that each prison was under at the time of our visit were taken into account. We relied on what participants told us about reading education at their prison before the pandemic. These interviews suggest that, as a result of the pandemic, education has a lower priority than it has previously.

Finally, we were not able to audio-record our conversations with participants for security reasons. Instead, a dedicated researcher took notes of the discussion in real time. A 15-minute period following each interview was scheduled to ensure that the notes taken were as verbatim as possible. However, this means that the participant quotations given in this report may not be the exact wording, verbatim, that the participant used.

Annex A

On these visits, we carried out deep dives into reading. These included:

- interviews with senior leaders in the prison and education department, including the governor, the prison-appointed education manager and the education manager from the organisation contracted to provide the core curriculum
- interviews with teachers of English functional skills courses, as well as one interview with an ESOL teacher and one with an additional learning support officer
- an interview with the librarian and visit to the library
- interviews with prisoners enrolled on entry-level and level 1 English courses
- interviews with all those involved in delivering the Shannon Trust peer-to-peer mentoring programme for early readers, including the responsible prison officer, peer mentors and mentees

scrutiny of curriculum plans and assessment data on reading

Annex B

At the start of the pandemic, prisons were placed under a system of restrictions known as ‘regime stages’ mandated by HMPPS. [\[footnote 22\]](#) The table below sets out the stage of restrictions that each of the prisons we visited were under at the time of our visit. All the prisons we visited were under stage 3 or stage 2 restrictions.

In stage 3, HMPPS guidance is that in-cell learning should be in place, priority workshops should be reopened and one-to-one learning should be delivered in a COVID-secure way. At stage 2, classroom education and greater workshop activity should be reintroduced.

Table 1: Level of COVID-19 restrictions in place during our visits

Prison pseudonym	Prison regime stage of COVID-19 restrictions
Prison 1	3
Prison 2	2
Prison 3	2
Prison 4	2
Prison 5	1
Prison 6	2

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-
1. Over the last 5 years, around 60% of prisons have been graded inadequate or requires improvement for education, skills and work. This compares with just 20% of provision in other parts of the further education sector that we inspect, as we reported in our 2019/20 Annual Report: [‘Ofsted Annual Report 2019/20: education, children’s services and skills’](#), Ofsted, December 2020. [↪](#)
 2. Ofsted makes judgements and awards grades to the aspects that contribute to the overall effectiveness of the education provision delivered in prisons. Our judgements contribute to HMIP’s ‘purposeful activity’ part of its 4 tests of healthy prisons. HMIP grades purposeful activity based on Ofsted’s findings and grades and other factors such as prisoners’ time out of cell, library use and access to the gym. [↪](#)
 3. [‘Learning and skills for the longer-serving offender’](#), Ofsted, January 2009 (now accessed through the National Archives); [‘Learning and skills for offenders serving short custodial sentences’](#), Ofsted, January 2009 (now accessed through the National Archives). [↪](#)
 4. [‘Launching our prison education review’](#), Ofsted, September 2021. [↪](#)
 5. [‘Prison education statistics 2019–2020’](#), Ministry of Justice, August 2021. [↪](#)
 6. Functional skills English qualifications can be taken at a range of levels from entry level 1 to level 2. The latter is broadly equivalent to a GCSE pass at grades 4 to 9. [↪](#)
 7. [‘Functional skills subject content: English’](#), Department for Education, February 2018. [↪](#)
 8. HMPPS contracts with 4 education providers to supply the Prison Education Framework for prisons. See [‘Procurement for prison education dynamic purchasing system’](#), Ministry of Justice, January 2019. [↪](#)
 9. [‘Evaluating the effectiveness of correctional education: a meta-analysis of programs that provide education to incarcerated adults’](#), RAND Corporation, 2013. [↪](#)
 10. Including English functional skills and ESOL courses. [↪](#)
 11. The functional skills curriculum at entry levels 1 and 2 should be used to teach prisoners to read or improve very basic reading skills. [↪](#)
 12. [‘Subject content functional skills: English’](#), Department of Education, February 2018. [↪](#)
 13. These prisoners were identified as working at entry level 3 or below in functional skills. [↪](#)
 14. [‘Prison education evidence to Ofsted’](#), University and College Union, March 2022. [↪](#)

15. P Cirino, M Romaine, A Barth and others, '[Reading skills components and impairments in middle school struggling readers](#)', August 2013. [↶](#)
16. In 2019, 'Curious' was created as a centralised database to share information about prisoners' education between prisons. The Curious database covers prisoners' initial assessments, participation and achievement in courses. [↶](#)
17. Before COVID-19, prisoners would have anything between 8 and 11 hours out of their cell. [↶](#)
18. '[Unlocking potential: a review of education in prison](#)', Ministry of Justice, May 2016. [↶](#)
19. '[Learning and skills for the longer-serving offender](#)', Ofsted, January 2009 (now accessed through the National Archives). [↶](#)
20. Including English functional skills courses and English for speakers of other languages. [↶](#)
21. Including Shannon Trust, English for speakers of other languages and functional skills courses. [↶](#)
22. '[COVID-19: national framework for prison regimes and services](#)', Ministry of Justice and Her Majesty's Prison and Probation Service, June 2020. [↶](#)

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