

Low Literacy Correctional Students in North Dakota

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Abstract

The North Dakota Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation has developed two methods of working with low-literacy students. One is testing for accommodations for GED testing. The other is integrating the STAR literacy program for adult readers.

Keywords: corrections, literacy, GED, accommodations, STAR

Adult students in correctional settings have many educational barriers and differences that set them apart from adult students at a community adult learning center (ALC). In North Dakota, the median age for a non-corrections adult student is 19, with 91% of the students being under age 30. However, in North Dakota corrections, the median age is 28, with nearly half of the students being over age 30. Statistics from a U.S. Department of Justice survey show that nearly a quarter of all state and federal prisoners questioned had been in special education classes in school (Maruschak et al., 2021). This compares with the roughly 15% of the general population in special education classes in the United States (Irwin et al., 2023) Anywhere from 15-26% of all state prisoners reported that they had been told by a professional that they had a learning disability such as dyslexia or dyscalculia (Brazzell et al., 2009; Maruschak et al., 2021). While it is difficult to find either state-specific or national/federal prison statistics for literacy rates among incarcerated individuals, the fact is that many of these individuals have low reading rates, whether because of learning disabilities, lack of education, or other reason. School districts across the nation are starting to turn to the Science of Reading to remedy these reading problems before fourth grade. But what about correctional educators and their adult students?

National adult correctional education numbers are hard to come by, as some states report numbers and others do not. The Programme for the International Assessment

of Adult Competencies (PIAAC) Survey of Incarcerated Adults shows that those without a high school diploma have an average literacy score of 224, which is at Proficiency Level 1 (Rampey et al., 2016). Less than 2% of incarcerated individuals receive basic educational or vocational education (Brazzell et al., 2009). However, the PIAAC Survey shows that approximately 30% of respondents had less than a high school credential, with 18% of respondents stating that they wanted to enroll in high school completion or high school equivalency (Rampey et al., 2016). Reasons incarcerated adults may not be able to take part in education include not being eligible to attend or being on a waiting list for a program, which may be taught by certified teachers, volunteer teachers, or incarcerated tutors (Brazzell et al., 2009; Rampey et al., 2016).

I am an instructor in the North Dakota Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation (ND DOCR), and I am addressing the issue of literacy from our local level. In the ND DOCR, anyone coming into the system without a high school diploma or high school equivalency is required to be enrolled in the education department for GED preparation. Because the ND DOCR requires anyone without secondary-level education to be in educational programming, the education department contains students of all ages, abilities, and desires for education. This is in contrast with students at an ALC who are there because they choose to be there.

Adult education programs in North Dakota use the Test

of Adult Basic Education (TABE) for assessment tracking purposes. The TABE scores in the ND DOCR range from National Reporting System (NRS) Level 1 through NRS Level 6. For the purposes of this article, I'm defining L1 and L2 as low literacy (they range roughly from Grade 1-3 reading level). At the time I was writing this article, there were 208 students enrolled across the four adult facilities that comprise the ND DOCR. When I tallied students' reading scores, I was shocked to see that 109 out of 208 were in the L1 and L2 range. Having approximately half our students test at third grade reading level or lower represents a large challenge for a small department (19 state-certified teachers in the four adult facilities).

Approximately 31 of these students may have a disability such as dyslexia, with up to 104 possibly having been in special education classes in school. While we do not formally track these numbers, our informal interactions with students show that these numbers are not too far off. These interactions can include discussions in which a student shares that he or she was in special education class in school or more explicitly telling us they were "diagnosed with" dyslexia or another learning difficulty in school.

The importance of being aware of disabilities and advocating for students cannot be understated. Under the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), state and federal entities such as prisons are required to advise and help those with disabilities to be able to fully participate in education. Recently, the federal government sued the state of Minnesota for not helping those with disabilities to apply for and access official accommodations from GED Testing Service (GEDTS), leaving those students unable to complete a GED diploma and move on to further educational training within the prison system (*United States of America v. Minnesota Department of Corrections*, 2023). The consent decree signed by both parties spells out what the Minnesota Department of Corrections (MN DOC) must fulfill, including (but not limited to) making reasonable modifications within their GED-prep program and classes for qualified individuals with disabilities; responding in a timely manner to requests for modifications, accommodations, or auxiliary aids or services; evaluating requests for modifications, including individual assessments where indicated. The department was also ordered to hire an agency-wide ADA compliance officer and appoint an ADA coordinator at each individual facility. Additionally, the MN DOC is

ordered to pay compensation to individuals who had been aggrieved by the actions of the department. Finally, they must report program compliance data to the government every 6 months (*United States of America v. Minnesota Department of Corrections Consent Decree*, 2023). This is an important issue for all of us in adult education to be aware of, as we all have individuals with disabilities that are protected by the ADA.

Seeing that the federal government takes this very seriously, how can adult educators, and specifically correctional educators, address literacy and disability needs while continuing to teach GED prep courses? In the ND DOCR, we have developed a two-pronged approach, the first involving literacy instruction, and the second involving GED testing accommodations. Although I use the term "two-pronged," many students are in both categories at the same time.

In the fall of 2021, my colleague and I were part of a national, remotely conducted cohort in learning Evidence Based Reading Instruction (EBRI) through Student Achievement in Reading (STAR) literacy training, a federal initiative for adult literacy educators from the U.S. Department of Education's Office of Career, Technical, and Adult Education (OCTAE). As we learned about EBRI and the methods to assess and instruct for reading improvement, we recognized that what we were learning filled a large missing piece in our educational toolbox. STAR classes are aimed to reach those in the intermediate reading ability range (defined by STAR as between grade 4-8 reading level), with the methods and principles working effectively as well for those in the beginning and advanced ranges. Our students in the intermediate reading level started making gains in their reading scores, improving their reading ability, and passing GED tests. As an example, I had a student I had worked with during a couple of incarcerations. He had passed his math GED test but struggled with reading comprehension, to his and my frustration. As I learned the techniques through STAR, I kept this person in my mind. I placed him in my first STAR class and told him that I was so excited to practice what I was learning with him. After about three months of working on reading comprehension using EBRI, this student was able to start passing his tests, eventually becoming our first GED graduate of the 2021-2022 school year! I have more students who have followed a similar path, but this one was special for me.

Because of the success our students were having, and because of their positive reviews of the STAR classes, we gained permission to become state-level STAR trainers, beginning our training in the fall of 2022. We have recently completed training six ND DOCR instructors and three administrators in the STAR teaching techniques and EBRI philosophy. Since the training was completed so recently, we don't have full results yet, but we're hopeful that this will further aid our L1 and L2 students who struggle with literacy.

For the second approach, we have developed an assertive policy aimed at identifying and assessing students for potential disabilities affecting their learning. These assessments may lead to accommodations in classwork and practice testing and can be used to request formal testing accommodations from GEDTS. GEDTS allows for several different accommodations, including extra time, testing by oneself, extra breaks, a reader, or a scribe. Additionally, if the students go on to work with North Dakota Vocational Rehabilitation after re-entry, they can present these assessments for specific, personalized assistance.

The first step in this approach is for our test administrators and teachers to be aware of incoming students with low literacy. If our TABE test administrators see a new student's score fall into an L1 or L2 range in reading, they can reach out to the teachers to make them aware of this student's level. These scores may be low because the student chose not to take their time or was annoyed at having to take the TABE tests, or they may be low because of language (if English is their second language) or reading disability or a traumatic brain injury. The teachers observe the students to see how they perform in the classroom: Are they performing at a higher level than their TABE tests would indicate? Are they struggling with basic literacy? Do they need glasses to read their textbooks or the TABE test? Do they retain what they've learned in class?

If educational staff working with an individual suspect a learning disability, or if the student self-reports having been in special education in school, the educators can reach out to the special education teacher, who is housed at the North Dakota State Penitentiary in the education department. This individual is qualified to give assessments to students who have been identified as possibly needing

accommodations. We give two assessments, the Wechsler Adult Intelligence Scale – Fourth Edition (WAIS-IV) and the Woodcock Johnson – Fourth Edition (WJ-IV). The first of these assessments looks at cognitive abilities and IQ, while the second measures knowledge and academic ability compared to others their age. A combination of these two assessments can help to diagnose and ascertain what the student may need for accommodations.

These assessments must be scored, and the scores must be analyzed by a trained PhD psychologist. Some of these are analyzed in-house by psychologists in our ND DOCR treatment department. Additionally, as we have started raising awareness among teachers and assessing more individuals, we have contracted an outside psychologist. Each of these evaluations takes about two hours to administer to the student (a total of 4 hours per student) and about 5 hours to analyze. This represents a great investment of time and money into every one of these students. Nevertheless, about 7 years ago, our then-director felt it was necessary to lower educational barriers to as many students as possible, and our current director continues to support this investment. Teachers who, through the years, have seen the benefits for our students now encourage newer teachers to look for students who could benefit from having accommodations in their testing. Assessing so many students has also reduced the stigma surrounding accommodations. When students see that their classmates can be successful with extra time or with a reader, they are more likely to reach out to us and ask if they can be assessed, as well.

The results of these assessments may show us that a student could be successful taking GED tests if he or she had extra time, extra breaks, or even a reader. In this case, we send the assessment to GEDTS, asking for accommodations to be granted. Because of our detailed documentation (if we think the student would benefit from a reader, for example, we make that suggestion to the psychologist, who writes it in the recommendations), we usually get the accommodations we request. It can be difficult and expensive for a student to receive assessments and evaluations on their own while working at a regular ALC; thus, accommodations are more difficult to obtain for the student working on his or her own. The GED testing accommodations are valid for two years and can be renewed with a signed request from the student. Therefore, if a student is working on getting his or her

GED diploma and is released before completing the testing, he or she can go to an ALC and have the same accommodations available.

These assessment analyses also help the instructors. For example, if a student needs to have material read aloud for comprehension, the teacher can read materials aloud in class to help the student process the information. This helps the student learn the material in the way he or she best can, giving greater likelihood of success in the classroom and in testing. I have also had good results practicing as a reader with my students who have reader as an accommodation. Together we can figure out how they want their tests read to them so they can direct their testing reader when entering the testing situation.

For administrators wishing to make successful education outcomes more attainable by students with learning disabilities, there are several steps to consider. The first is personnel. Administrators must determine the person or persons who will be giving the assessments and if they will be doing this full-time or part-time. Administrators also need to take into consideration the cost of purchasing the assessment tools and the cost for having each assessment evaluated. In a correctional setting, if the correctional treatment department is able and willing to evaluate these assessments, they may be done in-between other projects but will not incur an additional cost. If the facility chooses to contract with an independent psychologist, this will lead to a cost per assessment. Once a student has been assessed, a staff member (preferably the person giving the assessments)

will need to send a request for accommodations, along with the assessments, to GEDTS. This person also will communicate the findings to the teachers who are in contact with this student, so they can work together to make the learning environment as appropriate as possible. Once the accommodation has been granted by GEDTS, the facility GED test administrator must be informed so that he or she can arrange for these accommodations when registering the tester.

Both approaches, accommodations testing and STAR (or another EBRI) reading training, take time and a commitment to rise past the status quo. Change is rarely enjoyable. However, that is not a reason or an excuse to ignore this overlooked group of students having high needs. The whole reason for having a correctional education department is to help people to break the cycles that bring them into carceral settings. We recently had a man who we could see needed extra time, and, after going through the assessment process, he was granted 100% extra time for taking a test. When he successfully completed his GED testing, he asked for advice in thinking about post-secondary education. His statement to me was, "This opens so many doors I didn't even know were there." We know we are making a difference when we have students who earn a GED diploma with accommodations or after having taken STAR reading classes. If you are an adult or correctional teacher or administrator looking for an impactful way to serve your students, look at your remedial reading program and consider accommodations testing for your students.

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