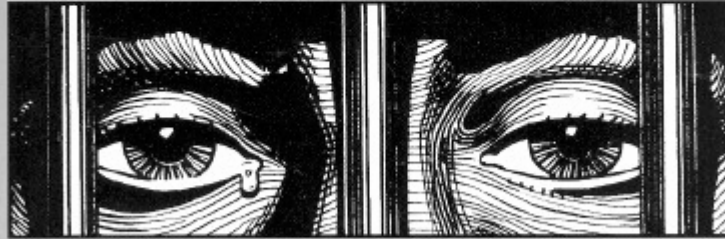


RETARDING



AMERICA

The
Imprisonment
of Potential

Michael S. Brunner

Reviews of the research literature provide ample evidence of the link between academic failure and delinquency. It can also be shown this link is welded to reading failure. It is proposed that research-based reading instruction can be used to reduce recidivism and increase employment opportunity for incarcerated juvenile offenders.

A re-examination of the research literature and interviews with reading instructors teaching juvenile offenders in correctional institutions in five states was undertaken to determine: 1) if, in fact, it is sustained frustration, rather than academic failure per se, that leads to delinquency; 2) the extent to which reading failure is the cause of this frustration, not learning disabilities per se and/or marginal intelligence; 3) what critical obstacles prevent educationally at-risk students from learning to read accurately and fluently and to write legibly and grammatically what they can talk about and aurally understand; and 4) what steps must be taken to supplant current instructional practices with methods that can be validated by experimental research in order to prevent reading failure as well as help disabled readers become competent readers.

The research revealed: 1) reading failure is most likely a cause, not just a correlate, for the frustration that can and does result in delinquent behavior; 2) an inordinately high percentage of wards are unable to decipher accurately and fluently and write legibly and grammatically what they can talk about and aurally comprehend; 3) a high percentage of wards are diagnosed learning disabled with no evidence to indicate any neurological abnormalities; 4) handicapped readers are not receiving the type of instruction recommended by experimental research; 5) reading teachers, as a result of preservice reading methods courses, have been denied a working knowledge of the reading programs and methods of in-

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struction that are most successful in preventing reading failure as well as *meeting the needs of handicapped readers*.

In order to remove the barriers to improved reading instruction so as to allow handicapped readers to become proficient readers in the shortest time possible, it will be necessary to provide reading teachers with the opportunity to acquire a knowledge of the alphabetic principles governing English spelling as well as to become confident in using instructional programs that incorporate intensive, systematic phonics methods. For this to be accomplished, inservice training most likely will have to come from private sector literacy providers because departments, schools and colleges of education have a poor track record in providing this type of instruction.