

Reading the Way: A social practice approach to reading development in prisons

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Sarah Turvey is co-founder and director of Prison Reading Groups (PRG) which sets up, funds and supports informal reading groups in prisons. Target membership ranges from very experienced readers to those who feel they struggle with reading. PRG celebrates its 25th anniversary this year and has grown from two groups in 1999 to over 90 groups in more than 70 prisons nationwide. For further information see our website <http://www.prisonreadinggroups.org.uk/> or contact sarah@prg.org.uk (PRG is part of registered charity Give a Book).

Introduction and Overview of Paper

Reading the Way (RtW) is a mission to create spaces in prisons to practise and enjoy reading and listening, and to talk with each other about reading and what we read. It was initiated in 2022 by Prison Reading Groups (PRG), part of the charity Give A Book and led by Sarah Turvey, in collaboration with adult literacies experts, Professor Sam Duncan and Claire Cullinan, and a prison education expert, Esther Kelly, who is the Reading Strategy Lead for prisons in Greater Manchester, Merseyside and Cheshire, employed by the education provider Novus. We four have come together here to share our understanding of how the RtW project helped us to think more carefully about what it means to say that one is taking a Literacy as Social Practice approach to reading or wider literacies development; how the approach may add to our understanding of Practice Engagement Theory (PET) (Reder, 1994;

Reder et al, 2020) and what this might tell us about the complexities of assessing the influence of adult literacies interventions and projects (we use ‘influence’ purposely instead of the more usual ‘impact,’ arguing that influence allows for more reflection on causality and forms of effect over time); and, finally, how we expressed RtW as for ‘emergent readers’ and why this terminology and the conversations behind it matter in prisons and our wider communities.

Genesis of Reading the Way

Reading the Way was inspired by an inspection report in England in 2022; ‘Prison education: a review of reading education in prisons’ (Ofsted/HMIP, 2022). This report stressed the need for more attention to developing reading in prisons, emphasising a perceived lack of focus on supporting prisoners’ abilities in decoding and the need for more phonics-based approaches. However, while this report also mentions the importance of reading for pleasure, it provides little direction in how to foster it, particularly for those learning to read or less confident in their reading. Furthermore, it devotes little attention to the crucial relationship between enjoyment, reading practices and the development of reading skills. Drawing on our experiences of the work of Prison Reading Groups (PRG, 2024), research into reading circles and adult literacy development (Duncan 2012, 2014) and our wider adult literacies work, we decided to try to develop reading groups aimed at those in prison who feel they cannot read or are less confident in their reading.

What we did in the Pilots

Reading groups (that is, groups of people coming together to read together or talk about what they have read, where the emphasis is on the collaboration and discussion) are very popular in prisons. However, we were aware that most existing groups were unlikely to appeal to emergent readers who feel they cannot read and/or struggle with reading. We therefore developed two pilot reading groups specifically aimed at emergent readers (a concept discussed below), at HMPs Thameside and Liverpool, with an emphasis on discussion and shared interests.



Image by Erika Flowers

Each pilot group ran for five weekly sessions of around 90 minutes. They were facilitated by a team of two or three from our planning group, including at least one person who regularly works within the prison and one adult literacy expert. The choice of venue within each prison depended on the local situation, with one group held in the library and the other in a rearranged classroom. We selected a story (‘My Polish Teacher’s Tie’ by Helen Dunmore) to

break into five short chunks to read gradually over the five-week period. We supplemented this continuous narrative with short, varied texts to explore themes and ideas raised by discussions of the story and, crucially, participants' interests. We planned to start each pilot group with reflections on the nature of reading and reading experiences as we felt it was important to share our thinking about the social nature of reading and what it might mean to be a 'good' reader of a particular text or in a particular context (see the discussion below on Literacy as Social Practice). While we did a small amount of this important discussion work, in practice though, the usual pattern each week involved a greeting and welcome, refreshments and seeing how everyone was, followed by a recap of what we remembered about the story so far. We then read the next section of the story aloud (taking turns as desired, with us as facilitators kicking off the reading aloud and then opening it up, tentatively, to see if anyone else wanted to read, and they always did) and had a discussion about what we had read, what struck us, what might happen next etc., followed by reading and discussing some other texts. The group members shared topics they found interesting and text types they wanted to read, and each week the facilitators brought in materials based on these suggestions (for example, song lyrics from favourite songs, recipes for popular dishes and letters from admired activists or politicians). As the weeks went on, we as facilitators said less and the other group members spoke more.

Participants were invited to read aloud during the sessions but also assured that it was fine to listen, follow along in the text and participate through discussion. We felt it was particularly important to spend time talking about how this reading group would be a space where we support each other, and to agree 'ways of working'. For example, agreeing to take turns in reading and say 'pass' if we wanted to decline reading aloud; the importance of listening to people when they're reading, and deciding when and how we might interrupt, help or join in if somebody was struggling with a word. We also discussed the 'rights of the reader' (Pennac, 2006) and other topics that we felt would contribute to critical explorations of what it means to be a reader and help 'apprentice' RtW group members into 'the guild of knowers' (here, people who are 'good at' reading and feel free to enjoy discussing texts and ideas within texts that they find meaningful, or not), drawing on Sadler (1989) in Marshall and Wiliam (2006, p.5.)

From the beginning, some group members were keen to read parts of the texts aloud. As the weeks went on, everyone wanted to read aloud at least part of the time, and did. As facilitators, we noticed early on that some group members had solid phonic decoding skills, that is, they could 'sound-out' and verbalise most of the words in the text. But we also noticed that sometimes those more confident with word-level reading had trouble remembering what they had read or building up meaning presented over a paragraph or two. Others were stronger at understanding the meaning being built up, but read much more slowly, struggling with fluency. This was a lesson in the range of strengths and needs in a group who all feel they 'cannot read' or 'cannot read much', and who, following from shared experience of being stigmatised as 'slow' or 'stupid,' wanted to read in a 'safe' and supportive group.

The concept that every participant and facilitator had different strengths in regard to reading and different ways to approach texts became key to the group members' increasing confidence and knowledge of their place as readers themselves. Realising that there are often many 'correct' ways to read a text allowed participants to feel happier to attempt reading new and unfamiliar material, safe in the knowledge that they couldn't really 'get it wrong'.

Overview of Evaluation

At the end of the pilot process, prior to launching RtW across the UK, we undertook an evaluation of our work (PRG, 2023). We drew on feedback and reflections we had gathered throughout the process, from prison reading group members and group facilitators. The evaluation report can be accessed via the [RtW webpages](#). This report allowed us to share our understanding, for example, of what worked in terms of recruitment. This included not promoting the sessions as 'education' and facilitators or RtW advocates who were based in prisons 'walking the wings' to have conversations with potential members. We considered the significance of confidence and the development of this in the reading groups, alongside a shared understanding with group members of what it is to be a 'good reader'. We also reflected on the facilitators' approaches and what makes a 'good facilitator', with 'being intrigued by stories' as an ideal attribute noted by RtW group members. Further, we identified the importance of giving group members as much autonomy as possible about what they read. As we noted:



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'the privileging of choice, personalisation and autonomy, important in any reading group, is even more important in the prison context where prisoners have "such a lack of agency over a lot of their life all the day, to have that choice, to have someone who'll actually listen to that and go, ok, well, we got you what you asked for. I think it goes a long way" (quotation from a facilitator)' (PRG, 2023)

We also touched on some theoretical ideas that were raised in our team discussions of the pilots. We would like to explore these in more detail below and include:

- how we followed a social practice approach to literacy development;
- how Practice Engagement Theory (Reder et al, 2020, Reder, 1994) can help articulate the influence of RtW, as well as what RtW might tell us about Practice Engagement Theory
- what we have learnt about the idea of an 'adult emergent reader'

Discussion Area 1: *what it means to follow a social practices approach to literacy development*

If someone says they are following a Literacy as Social Practice approach to their adult literacy teaching, do we all know what this means? There seems to be important agreement on what it means to see *literacy* through the lens of social practice theory. We can look at the work on Heath on literacy events, communities and power (Heath, 1983), Street's ideological vs autonomous views of literacy (Street, 1984), Barton and Hamilton's powerful chapter 'Literacy as Social Practice' (Barton + Hamilton, 2000), Papan (2005) on *Adult Literacy as Social Practice*, Prinsloo & Baynham (2008) on *Literacies, Global and Local*, and Street's (2016) later use of the term 'Literacy as Social Practice', finding a rich body of work on this socio-cultural conceptualisation of literacy that stresses the contextual, power-bound nature of literacy. Importantly, 'there are different literacies associated with different domains of life [...] Literacy practices are purposeful and embedded in broader social goals and cultural practices,' and, crucially, 'Literacy practices change and new ones are frequently acquired through processes of informal learning and sense making' (Barton + Hamilton, 2000, p. 8).

This body of work tells us something about how we can see literacy and its role in adult lives. It is not self-evident, though, what this means for the teaching or development of adult literacy. It certainly suggests that discussions of context and power are important, but beyond this, what does it really mean to be using a social practice approach to literacy development? One answer is that the curriculum itself (the *what* you are teaching more than the *how*) is the crucial factor, with a social practice approach building a curriculum from learners' lives, goals and desires. But what else? We thought about this a great deal in our discussions leading to the development of the RtW project and arrived at a sense of the importance of discussing with the reading group members a vision of literacy which recognises that literacy/reading practices vary, are carried out in different contexts, for different purposes, with different meanings and power structures at play, and so what it means to be good at reading also varies. This usefully takes us away from an idea that some people are 'good' at reading and some are not, and reminds us that we are all continuously developing our reading as we take part in new reading practices in new contexts or for new purposes. It also reminds us of how often reading practices are communal in nature and that working together, supporting one other (what Kalman, 2008, and others call literacy 'mediation'), is not something abnormal done to make up for individual deficiencies, but rather a common and fruitful way of working together on a common goal, with each person contributing their specific expertise (echoing the collaborative exchange of expertise central to all/most reading groups, Duncan, 2012).

These ideas were central to how we ran the RtW groups and our understandings of literacy and reading. They are also key to the ideas of Practice Engagement Theory, and what it means to be an 'emergent' reader, both explored next.

Discussion Area 2: *revisiting Practice Engagement Theory in terms of what we observed from the pilots*

One of the most influential and important thinkers in adult literacy education is Stephen Reder in Portland, Oregon. His work (Reder et al, 2020; Reder, 1994) examines a range of studies on adults' engagement in adult literacy provision and found that taking part in adult literacy programmes may not produce dramatic changes in 'proficiency' as tested using assessments designed to measure skills increases, but taking part in



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literacy programmes does produce changes in adults' engagement with a range of literacy practices (that is, what adults do with literacy in our daily lives), and that, over time, these changes to practices lead to changes to proficiency (and increases in proficiency lead to further development of daily practices). This seems to be a particularly important message for those involved in adult literacy education. Not only is engagement in adult literacy provision likely to produce greater participation in a range of literacy practices, and this participation is likely to produce increases in skills over time, but also, if the purpose of adult literacy provision is to support adults to do something they could not do before (read to their grandchildren, write a report at work, etc.), then changes to practices should probably be our end goal anyway. Usefully, in his 1994 chapter 'Practice Engagement Theory: A Sociocultural Approach to Literacy Across Languages and Cultures,' Reder (1994: 42) stresses that 'literacy practices develop through collaborative activity,' echoing our reflections on social practice theory and our notions (discussed next) of what it means to be an 'emergent' reader.

We were reminded of this work as we heard the reading group members talking about how taking part in the reading group has influenced them to do more with literacy around the prison, for example reading more signs, volunteering to 'read out' in other classes and recommending poetry to peers. The men spoke of these changes in terms of 'doing more' with literacy and also in terms of increased confidence; both of which seem crucial in understanding the power of a seemingly simple, low-key activity like a reading group – and how it relates to both the concept of literacy as social practice explored above, and the complex idea of an emergent reader explored below.

The wider influence of the pilot groups on participants was obvious to those facilitating them. We observed the changes in those who spent the first session silent but were reading sentences aloud by the end of the programme, those who said they didn't read at all in week one but were recommending poems to prisoners unconnected to the programme in week five and those who were unable to answer when asked for preferences on texts at the

start who were leading discussions in response to texts at the end. However, in a prison environment, those who provide space, time and resources to allow groups like RtW to take place often require measures of impact in quantitative terms which can be used to justify resources and influence decision making.

This provides a challenge for us, as RtW is not a formal education programme but a way for participants to engage in the practice of reading, to increase their confidence and see themselves as readers. There is no test which can be conducted to assess participants before and after the group, and as already noted, skills tests are not always the best way to capture the changes produced by taking part in something like RtW. What we do have to help us understand the influence of RtW is feedback from participants and from facilitators' reflections, which look at participants as readers, as part of a community, their confidence and wider changes to practices or behaviours outside of the group itself. Practice Engagement Theory gives us a language to argue for the significance of changes to practices.

Discussion Area 3: *what we have learnt about understandings of/classifications of the idea of an 'adult emergent reader'*

It seems that word 'emergent' was first used in the context of children's literacy by Marie Clay in her work on leading to the Reading Recovery movement (Sulzby + Teale, 1991) and that its use may have moved into the context of adult education in the 1990s, see for example (Conner, 1995) and gained wider use in the early 21st century (see for example, Duncan, 2014) as writers grappled with the complexities of talking about adults at the beginning of a reading journey. In our early RtW discussions, we felt the term 'emergent reader' was preferable to 'beginner reader' as it acknowledges that all adults living in literate societies have some knowledge of reading and writing and are rarely at the very beginning of a learning-to-read journey. Further, the term 'emergent' carries with it a recognition of the range of barriers experienced by those who feel they cannot read or can read very little, as well as the complexity of the relationships between past experiences, confidence and the ability to read a particular text on a particular occasion (see, for example, Mace, 1992; Schwab, 2010).

Notably, those who feel they cannot read may actually have significant existing reading skills (for example, some knowledge of sound-symbol relationships or awareness of the layout of a formal letter). It is therefore crucial to understand the impact of an individual's reading confidence and self-image. Further, we need to remember that confidence plays a crucial role in reading: to decode a written word into a spoken word, to build meaning up in a sentence or over a series of sentences or paragraphs, this all requires confidence in one's judgement (*Am I decoding this word right; is this the word I think it is? Am I correct in arriving at this understanding of a sentence? Am I right to interpret the meaning of these two sentences in this way, and therefore understand the next sentence in this light?*). Confidence is therefore not only desirable for reading (as it is for most things we do), but fundamental. Whether someone is or is not an adult 'emergent' reader is therefore extremely difficult to try to measure. 'Emergent readers' may be a complex and imperfect category, containing a range of needs, confidences and competences, but as a defining

principle for a reading group, it works: it is a group for those who want to develop and practise reading in a supportive environment.

We'd like to end this section with two thoughts. Firstly, our pilot reading group members noted that reading aloud and listening to others read (particularly when following along on the written text) is a powerful tool for reinforcing/developing knowledge of how spoken words are encoded as written words. As facilitators we also observed that reading aloud means that those who can read less themselves can still listen and join in conversations, while developing decoding knowledge through listening and following along. We were keen to stress that listening to others read aloud is nevertheless a form of reading (Duncan, 2021).

Secondly, the pilot studies revealed something about the importance, in the prison context, of the materiality of the texts we were using. We supplied photocopied sheets, in colour where possible, and the men appreciated being able to take these back to their cells, share with their cellmates and pin on their walls: to read again, to share, and to have. There is something about the physical nature of these texts, something to own, keep, remember and that they had chosen that was particularly important a) in the prison context where the outside digital world is so absent and b) in the context of 'emergent readers' (and Practice Engagement Theory, and Literacy as Social Practice theory) – where the idea of being someone who has, holds, reads, shares texts is so important.



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Next Steps, Hopes, Conclusion

Our Reading the Way partnership was initiated by the publication of a government report about poor reading education in English prisons, in particular for prisoners identified, in our terms, as emergent readers (Ofsted/HMIP, 2022). However, our early discussions were not centred on how people might improve their reading 'abilities' but, rather, how they might connect with texts, all kinds of texts, and practise reading as part of a community. We also discussed how reading group members might collaborate to determine what we read and

the direction of our discussions. We have explored these themes of community and collaboration in this article: in thinking through ideas for adult literacy development, in the nature/power of reading groups of all kinds, in ideas of literacy as social practice, in the idea of Practice Engagement Theory (we develop practices in a context, with others to lesser or greater degrees), and the idea of emergent literacy.

As a team of four, we have learnt a great deal from one another, with our various understandings of adult literacies and literacy development and prison life and education. RtW group members' ideas, suggestions and discussions added greatly to this learning and we feel sure these are messages that could be shared, through networks like RaPAL, to people in prisons and in our wider communities. While support for people to decode is critical as part of prison education, we found that all kinds of emergent readers can take part in and benefit from RtW groups; from those with very little understanding of the English written code, to people who don't like reading, who are embarrassed by their pronunciation of words or who lack confidence making meaning from texts. We have seen the positive outcomes of practising reading in a space where participants can collaborate, have control over what they read and experience reading in range of ways. As one participant put it: "It's like a live podcast".

We are happy to say that RtW groups have so far been established in nine prisons in England and Wales, and the number of people being given the opportunity to practise reading and see themselves as readers is growing. There is an open, supportive RtW community, where we share ideas for reading materials, how to source texts that people request, and how to set up and facilitate the groups. We think RtW has the power to transform many people's experiences of reading and, for the people who facilitate the groups, it is a chance to explore some important ideas and add to our understanding of adults' reading practices and development.

Partnership initiatives are challenging in prison. Restrictive regimes and contracts based on quantifiable 'outputs' make collaborative working across departments and with other organisations difficult. In this context, the success of the pilots and the new groups being established is especially pleasing and we hope it will encourage the development of more initiatives to support a widespread reading culture throughout prisons.

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