

Succeeding with Low Achievers

ELEANOR ROTH *

WHILE I was completing an article on the Nassau County Jail School, one of the correction officers suggested that I talk to Carl S., a surprisingly gifted inmate. "I think Mrs. Roth could help Carl," the officer told his supervisor. "She'd be interested in his work, too."

The supervisor put through a call, and Carl was escorted to his office at half-past three. At four o'clock the shift changed, and he would have to go back to his cell. The officer told me that Carl was going to be released in a few days, so I knew I would not have another opportunity to see him.

Carl brought a sample of his work, and after I read his remarkable story I looked at him earnestly. "I'm sure you're going to submit your work to magazines," I told him. "Most editors will tell you what's wrong with your work, but I'll try to tell you what's right. I'll try to highlight your strong points."

Carl listened intently while I pointed out the outstanding job he had done with the characters in his story, and while I backed up each of my statements. Unsubstantiated or undeserved praise should not be given.

During that time-pressured interview with Carl, I instinctively followed the same method the jail school supervisors use—a method which has made the Nassau County Jail a unique educational institution. This jail is one of few county jails in the world that can boast an accredited high school.

Because it is a county jail, the occupants are held either because they cannot raise bail while awaiting trial, or because they are serving sentences of one year or less on each count. The average inmate's stay is only 35

to 40 days. Yet in spite of this, the Nassau County Jail School awarded more diplomas in the past five years than any federal prison in the country. To date, 322 boys have been graduated, and of these, 13 continued on to college while one entered the Air Force Academy. The state, not the jail, scores the final examinations and grants the diplomas, thereby making "easy" grading an impossibility.

Tom Walsh, a teacher on loan from the East Meadow School District, and Sgt. Philip De Julio, Supervisor of Education and Rehabilitation, are largely responsible for this phenomenon. By revitalizing several ancient concepts to achieve a new educational approach, these men have rehabilitated pupils who considered themselves to be academic failures. Mr. Walsh's teaching method utilizes mathematical coordinates of the Stanford Achievement Test and the raw score of the New York State High School Equivalency Test. When testing potential students, he obtains their cumulative raw scores in nine different areas which can be measured from the third to the twelfth grade. Then, in the same approach that I had taken with Carl, he starts the students in their strongest area first, to build up their confidence.

One might expect that the inmates are usually slow learners, but this is not the case. The pattern that does remain constant is that whatever their potential is—and some of them score surprisingly high—they are always underachievers.

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Photo courtesy of the author

Sergeant Philip De Julio, Supervisor of Education and Rehabilitation at the Nassau County Jail, helps an inmate with a problem.

Each boy works independently at his own level. Group classes are held only when several boys are working in similar, more difficult areas in math, such as square roots or factoring. Every student is able to receive 20 hours of this type of instruction per week.

Working Against Time

Many students, however, are slow learners, and the school has a special track system for them. Some of the boys who decide to go back to school are reading at a second-grade level only. Although this disheartening fact disqualifies them from entering the school, 15 volunteer remedial reading teachers come into the jail several times a week to help them. When these determined young men have brought themselves up to the third-grade reading level—the lowest level at which the teachers feel a student can possibly understand his lessons—they can enter the jail school program. Unlike other areas studied in the school, remedial reading is achieved at a one-to-one student-teacher ratio.

Although the jail school originally served only boys, a high school equivalency program for girls has recently been initiated.

The teachers are volunteer nuns from the Holy Trinity High School in Hicksville, New York.

The fact that the graduating inmates have truly been "reached" is brought home during the graduation ceremonies which are held every year. Inmates who have graduated, but who have already been released, are invited to participate in the ceremony. A most surprising fact is that almost half of them do return for the occasion, even though they must take time off from their jobs to do so. This is their way of showing the respect and appreciation they feel toward those who helped them.

A number of inmates and "civilian" graduates told me how they felt about their accomplishment. "I'd considered myself a failure in school," one of them said. "I was astonished that I could actually pass the tests and earn my diploma."

The fact that the boys do not know how long they will remain in jail and are working against time acts as a powerful incentive. These boys expend more effort than they have ever used before to accomplish a task that they had considered hopeless.

One student covered 100 pages of math in one weekend, while another received his diploma in 30 days, with almost no supervision. Boys who never "cracked" a book in regular school often cover as many as 300 textbook pages in a weekend. Yet these boys often doubt their own progress reports. Their low self-confidence, combined with their belief that people are basically looking out for themselves, makes them distrustful. Their maturing process is well under way when they stop looking for the "angle."

I have questioned a number of jail school graduates and asked how they accounted for their success in the jail school after they had given up on any sort of academic achievement in regular schools.

"I had no errands to do here," one boy explained. I later learned that he was the oldest child in a fatherless home. Although he worked part-time to supplement the family income, his mother depended upon him for everything from shopping to child care.

"I had no distractions—no girls calling

up to bother me," another boy—an extremely good-looking boy—said quite frankly. But another boy was more thoughtful: "I used to freeze up in class on the outside, but I wasn't pushed into classes here. No one said I had to go. I came because I wanted to. I know this sounds strange—after all, this is a jail. But somehow, I just didn't feel that the school was part of an institution. If I felt that I was studying too much, I could stop. But aside from my work in the officers' mess (which the officers later told me ran from 10-14 hours a day), I had no other responsibilities outside of my studies. Nothing upset me: no family bickerings; no friends barging in to drag me away."

These jail school graduates are the same boys whose parents cried helplessly, "Officer, we can't do a thing with him!" It is extremely heartening to see what people in comparatively low levels of ability can achieve if they have the motivation to try. When this type of person realizes that achievement of any sort is within his grasp, the effect on his personality is enormous. Mr. Walsh has seen slow learners who related well to their instructor get through two years of work in one week.

"Our boys are a lot like children," the Supervisor of Education and Rehabilitation told me one day. "They're easily disillusioned at first, but once we gain their confidence and they begin conquering new concepts and achieving scholastic goals, they become overly confident. They start setting unrealistic sights for themselves in anticipation of their release. It is then that we must bring them back to reality without hurting their newly gained assurance." This is a most difficult task.

Yet after an inmate has passed through the series of barred doors for the last time, he must walk through the lobby as he leaves. A sign has been placed in a prominent spot, and it would be hard for him to miss it. It is the credo for Alcoholics Anonymous, but it has another meaning for a jail school graduate. "God grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change," it states, "courage to change the things I can, and wisdom to know the difference." □



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