

JC – A progress report of his seven weeks experience at VSE

At his initial assessment J said that he wanted to learn to read but was not interested in maths. He was unable to write anything about himself and his signature was almost illegible.

J is 18 years old and a member of the travelling community, although now settled in a house. He lives with both his parents and has seven siblings. He attended school until about the age of 8 when he left because he didn't like it. Since then he has had no formal education except when in custody. He clearly has educational difficulties, finds recognition of letters difficult and has a short attention span.

Having seen that he had difficulty in writing his name I assumed, correctly that we would have to go back to learning basic phonetics.

The pattern for the first four two hourly sessions has been similar. At each lesson we took six new letters of the alphabet and generally played around with them, to include writing them, putting them in order, recognising them when out of order, finding them amongst other letters etc. Each week we went back over the letters learnt previously, doing a similar exercise until he became familiar with the entire alphabet. He now knows, can recognise and write the letters of the alphabet. We then worked from the first pages of 'Toe by Toe' including letter recognition and phonetic sounds.

Having done approximately 40 minutes of concentrated work J usually complained of being tired so we then played a game. He liked and we played snakes and ladders, with the express intention of giving him the opportunity of doing simple addition of dice numbers. This he enjoyed and managed quite well.

Finally we returned to the letters to see what he had remembered and to try and put two letters together to make a word, this gave him an opportunity to feel that he had achieved some simple reading of words. This was usually followed by a 'learning' game such as recognising all the words beginning with a given letter when I had called them out from a pack of word cards, he then claimed the card.

After four weeks J had mastered the alphabet and we moved on to reading from the earliest 'blue books'. These he struggled with but with some help he managed to complete two and felt that he had really achieved something, as he said 'reading from an actual book'.

At the end of each session, when asked for his written comment on his afternoons experience J always had something positive to say.

J found it difficult to concentrate for the full 2 hours and would often ask to finish after about 1.5 hours. On walking back to his unit we played a game of trying to read the words on the various 'improving' notices along the corridor, such as 'no smoking'. This helped him to make a connection between his knowledge of letter recognition and a practical application.

Although J clearly enjoyed his lessons and made a good start at learning to read I suspect that, not surprisingly, it had as much to do with being out of his cell than actually learning. After 7 sessions J left Feltham.