
Reading Failure and Juvenile Delinquency

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Anyone who has worked in a juvenile court system, a boys' training school, or a similar facility where delinquent adolescents are confined and evaluated will have been impressed with the conspicuous prevalence of reading failure encountered. Indeed, the literature dealing with delinquency is so heavily saturated with accounts of school failure and reading underachievement that anyone who will take the trouble to examine this relationship will easily be convinced that the typical adolescent boy who has been adjudicated a delinquent has also failed to achieve in reading. The problem is that while reading failure and delinquent behavior have been closely associated for decades, no one has been able to clearly determine which is cart and which is horse. Do delinquents simply not care about or take the time to become effective readers because they are too busy with their sociopathic activities, or does reading failure in some way become a psychogenic factor in delinquent behavior?

The problems in establishing casual relationships for two such complex behaviors as reading failure and delinquency are, of course, considerable. While reading failure can be observed in the child's first years in school, the consequences of this failure assume a cumulative effect over several years, and personality deterioration as a result of prolonged frustration may not be apparent until adolescence. Similarly, delinquency has long been thought to be a byproduct of complicated social factors which have economic, family, ethnic, and peer group implications extending over the adolescent's life experiences. In effect the only position a research study into the relationship between reading failure and delinquency can maintain is one of statistical correlation. If it can be shown that disproportionate and statistically significant numbers of adolescents, who have failed in reading and who later become delinquent, differ in important ways from other adolescent delinquents who have *not* failed in reading, then the possibility of objectively evaluating the psychogenic importance of reading failure to delinquency becomes a real possibility. While admitting that correlation does not imply causation, one is still faced with the sticky problem of explaining a relationship that could not be expected to occur by chance alone.

There are a number of other problems which must be considered when attempting to suggest a relationship between reading failure and delinquency. No one wishes to suggest that all children who fail in reading will later become delinquent. Such a suggestion would be unduly alarming, naïve, and not supportable empirically. Similarly, it would be very difficult to suggest that the schools have been unduly negligent in their approaches to early reading instruction. Unfortunately many educators have tended to view the delinquent as someone who has lacked motivation toward social conformity in general, and lacked motivation toward academic excellence in particular. Such a perspective has obviously been more comforting than the unsettling possibility that the schools themselves have actually been the cause of a complicated process that has resulted in sending many of their failures to boys' training schools as adjudicated delinquents.

RESEARCH MODEL

To demonstrate that school failure in reading which begins in primary school can result in delinquent behavior during adolescence, one must establish a hypothesis to link the two experiences. The following hypotheses were developed by me: (1) Continued failure in the most significant educational task challenging the child (reading) is a deeply frustrating experience when permitted to continue for several years, and when such failure begins prior to the child's developing ability to think rationally (approximately age seven and one-half). (2) Continued frustration over prolonged periods of time will result in aggressive behavior directed outward toward society (delinquency) or inward toward the self (neurosis). (3) Confined delinquent boys who have failed in reading will have behavioral histories showing more anti-social aggression than confined delinquent boys who were able to read. These hypotheses are based on objective findings relating frustration to aggression (Dollard and Miller, 1939; Miller and Dollard, 1950; Dinwiddie, 1955; Maier, 1956; and Gottfried, 1959) and on my own subjective personal memories as a reading failure who spent two years in both first and second grades.

METHOD

Two experimental populations of 48 boys each were randomly selected from state training schools in Lansing, Michigan and Red Wing, Minnesota.

The following data were available for each boy: (1) a complete social and behavioral history including court transcripts and notations covering behavior both before confinement and while at the training school; (2) an individual Wechsler intelligence test; (3) a reading achievement score based upon completion of Form K of the Stanford Achievement Test; (4) a student attitude instrument filled out by each boy (Minnesota Student Attitude Inventory); (5) a measure of Rokeach's construct dogmatism (Dogmatism Scale); (6) data about each boy concerning family, community, economic, and ethnic variables. The rationale for using two populations widely separated geographically was to help cancel out regional effects.

Following the collection and tabulation of data, it was possible to estimate each boy's degree of reading failure (using IQ measures and actual reading achievement test scores, and each boy's history of anti-social aggression, and to evaluate a host of related demographic factors pertaining to each boy. It was also possible to calculate rank order correlations on the above variables for each boy, and to examine levels of statistical significance among variables.

FINDINGS

It has been proposed by others that delinquent aggression is related to multiple causations (Mannheim and Wilkins 1955; Balogh 1958); to forced close dependency involvements and unfavorable early socialization (Bandura and Walters 1958); to infantile fantasies of omnipotence (Bernabeau 1958); to a lack of family and social controls (Nye 1958); to birth order among siblings (Mukherjeek and Kundu 1961); to body type (Gluek and Gluek 1957); and to reading failure (Backwin 1955).

Spearman rank order coefficients of correlation (Edwards 1960) were computed for each of our population samples separately. The correlations between reading and aggression were .33 for the Lansing sample and .40 for Red Wing. A *t*-test for significance (Hays, 1965) revealed that both correlations were significant* beyond the .05 level (Lansing, .025; Red Wing, .005). Thus, a significant correlational relationship between reading underachievement and aggression was demonstrated in two groups of widely separated delinquent adolescent boys.

* They were greater than could be attributed to factors of chance alone—in this case substantially greater.

In addition, the court report proved to be the most reliable measure of aggression across populations. Dogmatic attitudes among the boys did not appear to be related to either reading failure or aggression. School attitudes (self-report scale) did correlate with aggression. As one might expect, IQ was found to correlate with reading success in both groups. In a careful Chi-square analysis of demographic factors, none of the factors were found to be significantly related to aggression in either population of confined delinquent adolescents. That is, the present study was *unsuccessful* in attempting to correlate aggression with age, family size, or number of parents present in the home, rural versus urban environment, socio-economic status, minority group membership, religious preference, etc. *Only* reading failure was found to correlate with aggression in both populations of delinquent boys. IQ was equally related to reading among more or less aggressive boys.

DISCUSSION

The present study suggests that while we have known for decades that many children fail in reading, we have paid far too little attention to the eventual social consequences of this deeply humiliating experience. It is possible that reading failure is the single most significant factor in those forms of delinquency which can be described as anti-socially aggressive. I am speaking of assault, arson, sadistic acts directed against peers and siblings, major vandalism, etc. and not the more usual or garden variety delinquent acts such as car theft, burglary, etc. which most commonly result in adjudication to a boy's training school. It is possible that a detailed study of adolescent referrals to mental health agencies would also establish reading failure to be a common corollary with those forms of severe neurosis in which aggression has been directed in upon the self with consequent ego deterioration. A frustration-aggression hypothesis would apply equally well in cases where early reading failure resulted in adolescent neurosis. In such cases, one's personality type (introvert rather than extrovert) together with early constraints on overt aggression might determine that frustration caused by school failure would be directed at the self rather than at society. It is possible that much of the frustration associated with reading failure can be avoided.

Toward this end, I would offer the following suggestions:

1. Increase the size and efficiency of remedial reading programs, especially at the primary school level.
2. Redesign existing remedial programs to meet individual learning needs, using models of tested effectiveness.
3. When necessary, delay reading instruction until the child is developmentally and cognitively able to understand failure (i.e., to at least age eight).
4. Continue remedial reading and language programs as long as necessary, even through high school and into adulthood.
5. If a child is failing in reading, carefully explain to him why. Explain also that it is *not his fault*, nor is he dumb, and that reading skill, after all, is not the best measure of his worth as a human being.

We need to guard ourselves against the temptation to believe that like fresh air, pure water, and a loving mother, staying in school is somehow good for everyone.

We must admit that the problem of staying in school and always failing can be very frustrating. It cannot be a coincidence that in New Jersey three state training schools report an average reading grade level of 4.6. In Texas, children between the ages of 10 and 16 and in penal institutions are reading at an average grade level of 3.2. In South Carolina, the average grade level in reading for confined adolescents is 3.4. In Missouri, the average reading level for all incarcerated adolescents is mid-fourth grade. As one collects data on the relationship between reading failure and delinquency, one becomes depressingly aware that the relationship is neither minimal in degree nor regional in prevalence.

It has been reliably estimated that the cost of confining one adolescent delinquent in a state training school for one year exceeds \$10,000. With a similar amount of money, it would be possible to send that same boy to an excellent and exclusive boy's prep school, buy him \$2,000 worth of clothes, send him to the Carribean over Christmas and to Europe for the summer—and still have money left over.

Prevention seems preferable to confinement!

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