

<p><b>Institution: University of Roehampton</b></p>
<p><b>Unit of Assessment:</b> Panel D, UoA 29 English Language and Literature</p>
<p><b>Title of case study:</b> Reading Groups and the Prison Reading Groups Project</p>
<p><b>1. Summary of the impact</b></p> <p>This case study details the impact of pioneering research into reading groups, undertaken by Professor Jenny Hartley and Sarah Turvey. The huge expansion of reading groups and reader development in the UK over the last decade is largely due to their work. Underpinned by that research, their highly successful Prison Reading Groups project (PRG) now supports over 40 groups in more than 30 prisons. The key impacts of their work are:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Improvements in cultural life resulting from the popularity of reading groups.</li> <li>• A range of benefits for the prison community, including encouraging prisoner well-being and the development of the soft skills vital for rehabilitation and employability post-prison.</li> <li>• The creation of a model that has been transferred to other countries and new contexts.</li> </ul>
<p><b>2. Underpinning research</b></p> <p>The innovative research into reading groups that was undertaken by Professor Jenny Hartley and Sarah Turvey (principal lecturer) at the University of Roehampton in the late 1990s was the first, and still the only, major survey of reading groups in the UK. Their book <i>Reading Groups</i> was published by Oxford University Press in 2001, and then revised with new data and a preface by Margaret Forster as <i>The Reading Groups Book</i> a year later.</p> <p>Hartley and Turvey examined who joined groups and why; what they read together, and what they enjoyed about it. The research was both largely qualitative: through ethnographic and literary critical methodology, they analyzed the constituency and structure of reading group membership and behavior critiquing the characteristics of reading group choices. But it was also quantitative: <i>The Reading Groups Book</i> contains 60 pages of tabulated data from the 350 UK groups which they studied. A small follow-up survey was commissioned by the <i>Independent</i> newspaper (December 2001). Hartley was commissioned to conduct research for the Orange Prize on gendered reading habits in 2002 and 2003.</p> <p>The research findings identified the nature and benefits of informal learning for reading groups, and the significance of belonging to a reading community. Perceived benefits included the commitment to exploring the power of books through discussion and debate, the security of a safe space for sharing personal responses, and a sense of connectedness to a wider culture. Evidence also pointed to the importance to members of choice in how to run the group and choose the books.</p> <p>The characteristics of informal learning identified through the research struck Hartley and Turvey as applicable in a prison setting, particularly in terms of fostering the soft skills prisoners need for rehabilitation: the ability to communicate clearly, to discuss and exchange views in a rational manner, and to negotiate. Drawing on the research data and conclusions, the next stage was to trial reading groups along the lines indicated by the research (notably the centrality of choice) in UK prisons. Data from these prison groups (which were funded by a mix of charities) generated the research platform and working nucleus for an AHRC KTF grant in 2010, the core aim of which was the establishment of 10 new reading groups in a range of prison settings.</p> <p>This work has subsequently fed back into literary research into reading groups in prisons and, more generally, in nineteenth century Britain.</p>
<p><b>3. References to the research</b></p> <p>Jenny Hartley, in association with Sarah Turvey: <i>Reading Groups</i>, Oxford University Press, 2001, reprinted as <i>The Reading Groups Book</i>, 2002. [Available on request from submitting institution.]</p> <p>Extensively reviewed, see e.g. John Ezard, <i>Guardian</i> 1/03/01; Robert McCrum, <i>Observer</i> 11/03/0; cited widely in book history and literary criticism, e.g. David Finkelstein and Alistair McCleery, <i>An</i></p>

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*Introduction to Book History*, 2005.

Jenny Hartley and Sarah Turvey: 'Reading Together: the Role of the Reading Group inside Prison', *Prison Service Journal*, 183 (May 2009), pp. 27-32. (Presents hard data and input from prison groups across the UK in peer-reviewed premier journal for prison professionals.)

Jenny Hartley: 'Reading in Gaol' in *A Return to the Common Reader*, eds Beth Palmer and Adelene Buckland, Ashgate 2011, pp. 87-102. REF2.

Jenny Hartley: 'Nineteenth Century Reading Groups in Britain and the Community of the Text: an Experiment with *Little Dorrit*' in DeNel Rehberg Sedo (ed.) *Reading Communities from Salons to Cyberspace*, Palgrave, 2011, pp. 44-59.

### Indicators of Quality:

AHRC Knowledge Transfer Fellowship for Hartley (PI) and Turvey (CI) Prison Reading Groups Project January 2010-September 2012; award of £120,000, in partnership with the Prisoners' Education Trust.

### Associated Funding and Funding in Kind:

1999-2010: LEAs, Millennium Lottery Funding, Paul Hamlyn, private charities and trusts.  
Post 2012: Give A Book, Random House, Profile Books, Harvard University Press.

## 4. Details of the impact

Reading groups have been the success story of literary culture but largely ignored – even shunned – by the academy. Publishers recognise their worth and potential, and consult Hartley and Turvey frequently, as do UK public libraries. Reader Development initiatives include the huge expansion of public library reading group provision across the UK over the past decade. Invitations to run workshops and events for local authorities (e.g. Surrey and Hampshire) took Hartley and Turvey's work directly to public librarians setting up groups. The research is still frequently referenced in the national press; a recent example is Brian Viner, *Sunday Telegraph*, 13/03/13. The Prison Reading Groups project (PRG) and its phenomenal expansion in this arena brought Hartley's and Turvey's research to a new audience. This was a highly original application of the research, and has subsequently been developed and expanded by them.

### Reach:

PRG began in 1999 with just five groups but, following an AHRC KTF grant, numbers expanded between 2010 and 2012. Since 2010 PRG has exceeded the initial target of ten groups, and has set up and supported 44 groups in 31 prisons across the UK, as well as three community-based groups for ex-offenders or those in danger of offending. With expansion has come variety, as volunteers and facilitators rise to the challenges and needs of their particular constituency. Some groups meet weekly, some fortnightly and some monthly; all get free books provided by funding sourced by PRG. The emphasis in the model is on reader choice. PRG supports an ad hoc poetry group, a weekly group on a mental health wing, groups for Family Visit days, elderly prisoners, emergent readers, the visually impaired, and foreign nationals. Over 3,000 prisoners have participated in the programme since 2010 and PRG further extends its reach to all prisoners in the UK through its monthly 'Reading Group Round-Up' column in *Inside Time*, the newspaper distributed to all UK prisons, and the Bookclub on National Prison Radio, which was established with PRG support, and often records PRG groups for broadcast on NPR.

PRG has had an impact on approximately 200,000 UK prisoner hours since 2008. Each group lasts more than an hour, with an estimated 36,000 contact hours to date (including the estimated 4 hours reading time in preparation for each session). The reach also extends beyond group members: along prison wings as books and discussions are passed on, and outwards to prisoners' friends and families -- notably at prison Family Visit days.

**Significance:**

The immediate benefits of the PRG are felt by prisoners, prison professionals and volunteers. For the prisoners there are two key impacts: 1) the take-up and expanded range of reading, from *Othello* to *Gone Girl*; 2) the development of the soft skills vital for employability post-prison. One prisoner reported: 'Today we have not been in a prison, just a library.' The effects can be empowering, as described by another prisoner: 'for one hour a month the walls of my confinement crumble to dust and I feel respected. Not just by fellow inmates, but by citizens from the wider community, members of the society into which I'll one day be released - by the two women who run the group, and by the visitors they invite.' Benefits can also be felt by those close to the prisoners. For example, one prisoner recorded how his daughter 'shadow-reads' the same books, with the result that she 'feels closer to me when she feels that she "shares" an evening with me.' The longer-term benefits for prisoners who partake in PRG are difficult to assess, however some participants have gone on to join book-clubs or go to university when they have left prison.

Prison librarians, who assist with logistical arrangements inside the prison (a challenging but necessary task), support the scheme because they recognize the gains for members, including more openness and empathy among prisoners, and a 'willingness to see other points of view'. There are associated benefits for prison professionals and volunteers who help to coordinate and run the PRG. The research and ensuing practice are communicated to prison professionals through professional and practitioner-oriented publications, such as Hartley and Turvey's 'What Can a Book Do Behind Bars?' (*The Reader*, No 32, Winter 2008), commissioned research for the *Prison Service Journal*, and *What Books Can Do Behind Bars, Report on the work of PRG 1999-2013* (University of Roehampton 2013, 71). Professor Robert Waxler, pioneer of the US 'Changing Lives Through Literature' prison scheme, described the 2013 report as 'an impressive work - as is the program itself,' adding 'You are doing important work.' The report was described as 'inspiring' by film-maker Carol Noble, who is developing a script based on it and meetings she has had with PRG.

The volunteers PRG recruits to facilitate the groups are supported and mentored; PRG ran a series of annual workshops, and maintains an extensive e-list in order to disseminate best practice to all volunteers and professionals involved, along with interested 'fellow travellers'. An evaluation of the volunteer experience demonstrated that: two-thirds of them felt they had acquired new skills from running the groups; 77% had met and discussed books with people they would not normally meet, and all volunteers benefitted from hearing the views of prisoners, gaining new knowledge and insights into prisons and the prisoner experience. Similarly, prison governors recognize institutional benefits from the 'positive interaction between a diverse mix of cultures, backgrounds and experiences, united in the enjoyment of reading. The book club is of a huge benefit for the establishment, enabling women to learn, share experiences and unite in their enjoyment of books' (Deputy Governor, HMP Send).

Another indicator of the significance of the PRG is the high-profile endorsements of its work. The groups meet the criterion of the Prison Inspectorate for 'purposeful activity' among the prison population, and this has been endorsed by the Shadow Justice Minister Sadiq Kahn, who visited the HMP Wandsworth group in May 2012, and referred to PRG as 'an invaluable contribution'. John Hayes MP, Minister of State for Further Education, Skills and Lifelong Learning, Department for Business Innovation and Skills wrote in 2012: 'I was particularly pleased to see that Prison Reading Groups enjoy volunteer support'. Authors who have attended groups include Boris Johnson, Dame Penelope Lively, Howard Jacobson, Nicci Gerrard, Sean French, and Deborah Moggach. In 2011, PRG was nominated for a PrisonerActionNet award, sponsored by the Monument Trust 'to recognise outstanding services that have strengthened a sense of identity and belonging for prisoners and ex-offenders'. In 2013 PRG was nominated for a Royal Society for Public Health Arts and Health Award which focused on Creative Arts and the Criminal Justice System in Secure Settings and the Community.

**Beyond PRG:**

PRG also extends its reach and has increased its significance beyond the project. It acts as the

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'informal learning' arm of its project partners the Prisoners Education Trust (PET), and is represented on the influential new Prisoner Learning Alliance set up by the PET 'to provide expertise and strategic vision to inform future priorities, policies and practices relating to prison education, learning and skills'. PRG is instrumental in offering a model of reading groups as central for the provision of education in prison. PRG has provided training for PEN authors visiting prison groups, and help, advice and contacts for literacy organisations ('What a joy to walk away from a meeting feeling informed and inspired!' – Cathy Rentzenbrink, Project Director, Quick Reads, Sept 2013). PRG is frequently consulted by agencies such as World Book Night, CityRead, The Reading Agency, and the National Literacy Trust, all of whom recognize the value of reading groups and want to learn from PRG how to maximize their reach and effectiveness within the prison environment. PRG connects with publishers via the Reading Partners network, and contributes to government policy initiatives, for example the 2011 BIS consultation on Informal Adult and Community Learning (IACL). In promoting the recognition of the value of reading groups PRG facilitates its further reach by providing training, mentoring and advice to these groups.

The PRG model is now being applied elsewhere, extending the reach of the impact geographically and beyond prisons into new contexts. For example, Dr Carol Finlay has established an initiative in Canada on the PRG model, which now has eight reading clubs in penitentiaries in Ontario. The PRG team also mentors groups in other community settings, such as mental health, hostels for the homeless, cancer therapy centres, who have similarly established groups on the proven PRG model. PRG has also been consulted by UK philosophy lecturers about starting prison philosophy groups.

PRG's Give A Book website, and a constant stream of personal appearances, have together enabled PRG to extend the reach of its impact beyond the field of prison professionals to academic societies (SHARP, International Society for the Empirical Study of Literature), educational associations (London Association for Teaching of English, National Association of Advisors in English 2009, Prisoners Education Trust, PrisonerActionNet), universities (University of Utrecht, Edinburgh Napier University, Oxford, Bristol) and literary associations (PEN, Chipping Norton Literary Festival, London Book Fair). It is supported by publishers Random House, Profile Books and Harvard University Press, and the charity Give A Book has ensured PRG's viability for the next 4 years.

**5. Sources to corroborate the impact**

*What Books Can Do Behind Bars, Report on the work of PRG 1999-2013* (University of Roehampton 2013, 71 pp). <<http://www.theguardian.com/society/2013/jan/15/wandsworth-prison-reading-group>>

Laura Marcus, 'Prison reading groups grow thanks to AHRC funding', Feature for AHRC website, 10/10/12. <<http://www.ahrc.ac.uk/News-and-Events/Features/Pages/Prison-reading-groups.aspx>>

Ros Coward, 'Here, they don't have to be prisoners', *The Guardian* 16 January 2012.

**Testimonial evidence:**

Shadow Justice Secretary of State.

Deputy Governor, HMP Send.

Head of Policy, Prisoners Education Trust.

Executive Director and Founder, Book Clubs For Inmates, Canada.

Manager, Fountain Centre/Macmillan Information Centre for Cancer Therapy, Guildford.