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Research
Analysis

Reading to Reduce Recidivism (3R): A Computer Assisted Educational Program for Offenders

I. Introduction

The Reading to Reduce Recidivism Program (3R) is a computer assisted instruction program that addresses the educational and rehabilitative needs of offenders throughout their progression in the criminal justice system. An offender may begin the program while in the prison school system and continue the program in the community after being paroled if needed. Offenders can also be directly referred to the program by probation or parole officers. The 3R program uses a competency-based curriculum delivered via software specifically designed for adults lacking a basic education.

Research is currently being conducted by the Criminal Justice Policy Council (CJPC) to determine the overall effectiveness of the program. The evaluation will measure program validity in terms of reducing recidivism, improvement of cognitive and academic functioning, and employability. An examination of implementation procedures is also under way. This newsletter discusses the background, development, and current status of this program.

II. Correctional Education: Benefits and Demonstrated Need

Education in our society conveys much more than academic "schooling;" it is the means for providing and improving employment opportunities, increasing social mobility, and promoting culturally valued ideals. An education is becoming essential to obtain any employment, and computers are used in virtually every business from fast-food eateries to the trucking industry, requiring basic skills (Dees, 1990; McDaniel, 1990). Even many vocational and technical training schools now require a high school diploma or G.E.D. for admission,

as do the Armed Services.

Given these requirements, and considering that almost 70% of the offenders in Texas prisons and on parole lack a high school diploma or G.E.D., the potential success of offenders finding employment seems

Note from the Director

Education can be key to the successful reintegration of offenders into society. However, as discussed in a previous issue of our newsletter, the criminal lifestyle of offenders, prison crowding, and a criminal justice system fragmented into separate functioning entities are challenges that must be considered when developing educational programs for the offender population.

In this newsletter, Research Assistant Maria Shreves discusses the Reading to Reduce Recidivism program (3R), a computer-assisted instruction program for correctional education. Through the use of technology, the 3R program addresses the specific needs of the adult offender and eases the transition an offender must make from prison programs to the community. The program was developed in 1989 and is currently operational in two prison units, with a follow-up component in two community sites.

The Criminal Justice Policy Council is preparing a comprehensive process and outcome evaluation of this pilot program that will provide information of interest nationally. The goal is to establish if educational programs such as 3R can provide a cost-effective way to reduce recidivism.

Tony Fabelo, Ph.D.
Acting Executive Director

minimal. Research indicates that education and employment are key to offenders' successful integration in the community (Gendreau & Ross, 1987; Eisenberg, 1988).

In addition to limiting employment opportunities, lack of education could hinder an offender's response to treatment programs. The benefits of treatment and rehabilitation programs for drug or alcohol addictions or other problems are limited or not realized without the intrinsic skills provided by education: hierarchical thinking, reasoning, perception formation, and role taking.

The lifestyle of offenders, prison crowding, and a criminal justice system fragmented into separate functioning entities makes educating offenders a difficult task. The 3R program was designed to address these issues and provide the specialized services needed by this population.

III. Overview of the 3R Program

Background and Development. The 3R program was developed in 1989 by the Criminal Justice Division of the Governor's Office and the Texas Department of Commerce and is funded through the federal Job Training Partnership Act (JTPA). The Texas Department of Criminal Justice (Parole and Institutional Divisions, including the Windham School System) and the Texas Education Agency also help direct an offender's participation in the program. The Department of Commerce contracted with the Criminal Justice Policy Council (CJPC) to conduct a comprehensive process and outcome evaluation of the program.

The goals of the 3R program are for offenders to pass the General Educational Development (G.E.D.) exam and develop and improve the cognitive and technological skills necessary for functioning in our complex society. It is hoped that this will result in a reduction of recidivism. The computer-based program provides a flexible delivery system that offers continuous and individualized educational services to an offender. Thus, the program eases the transition an offender must make from prison programs to the community.

Placement into the program. Placement into the 3R program can occur while an offender is in prison, on parole, or on probation. In the present pilot phase of the program, participants must have an Educational Achievement (EA) score of 6.0 or above and meet established JTPA requirements. Because state law does not require inmates with an EA score above 6.0 to participate in education programs, the 3R program was

seen as an attractive alternative to encourage participation in this group.

Potential participants in prison are identified by a 3R counselor. The offenders must be paroling to a county that has a community 3R site or a county that is proximate enough to make transportation practical. The target site for the initial phase of 3R is Bexar County and the neighboring counties, Guadalupe and Comal. Tarrant and El Paso counties are being considered for program expansion. Once identified, inmates volunteer to participate in the program. They can complete the program while in prison, or they can transfer work in progress to a community 3R site after parole.

Offenders can also be directly referred by their parole or probation officer to the community site. Parole and probation officers are active in the program and visit the 3R sites to confer with the instructors and counselors and monitor students' progress.

Placement Within the 3R Program. Participants are tested in order to be placed in the appropriate level of instruction. An instructor tests the offender's EA score before entering the program, and then again after completion of the program. To measure student progress and readiness to take the actual G.E.D. test, pre-G.E.D. tests are administered. In addition to testing students, instructors monitor students' work on the computer through reports generated by the system that indicate level of learning, mastery of subjects, and problem areas. When the students' scores and classroom progress indicate that they are ready to take the G.E.D., the instructor will schedule them to take the exam.

Delivery. The selected software program, INVEST, is a broad-based, comprehensive computer assisted learning program that was specifically designed and written for adults who have not acquired necessary basic skills. The program has several levels of learning, each covering reading/vocabulary, language/writing, and mathematical/computational skills. The program also contains a life skills component and specific G.E.D. instruction. These components can be used alone or together to meet the needs of individual students.

The program's approach makes it especially suitable for the adult offender. Computer assisted instruction gives the student control and immediate feedback, without revealing his or her problems to others. The student does not have to keep up with a class or teacher. The program provides individualized open entry and open exit, which allows a student to enter at any level and work on topics and skill areas which he/she needs to pursue. By interacting with the computer, the student

assumes control of his or her own learning experience and becomes better prepared to solve problems and adapt to the future.

Transition to Community. The 3R program uses computer technology to offer continuous instruction to an offender while in prison, on parole, or on probation. Information and work in progress is transferred via a modem from prison to the community classroom. This aspect is important since inmates rarely spend enough time in prison to achieve significant progress toward their education. All program participants interviewed indicated that being able to continue with the same program in the free world was most helpful and encouraging for them.

The life of an incarcerated offender is very structured. While in prison, 3R participants are in class three hours a day, five days a week. When inmates are paroled, they need to assume their family, job and other responsibilities and provide for others' needs in addition to their own. Thus flexible schedules are necessary. The counselor at the community 3R site provides guidance and other support, such as arranging transportation and developing individualized schedules.

Role of the Teacher and Counselor. A computer assisted classroom does not diminish the importance of instructors and counselors. In fact, the use of computer technology allows each student to receive individual attention from the instructor without interrupting the entire class. Since students are working at their own pace and on different levels, this aspect is important. The counselor provides support and guidance based on the needs of the offender and consults with the probation or parole officer monthly.

Although the software provides appropriate and positive feedback, computers can address only certain aspects of the learning process. Instructors and counselors must promote a positive attitude and encourage students, and for this population, positive human interaction is imperative.

IV. Program and Evaluation Status

As of July, 1991, the 3R program has served over 200 participants from the Institutional Division and 72 from direct field referrals. There have been a total of 54 positive program completions with offenders' earning a G.E.D., 41 from those who began the program in the institution and 13 from field referrals. Some of these students have continued with their education and are attending college classes.

The program is currently operational in the

community only at two sites in Bexar County. The classroom at each site has 20 computer work stations and can accommodate up to 19 students at one time; one work station is used to manage the system. However, each classroom can serve more than 19 students at one time since students do receive individual instruction from teachers. The program has not yet been used to its capacity because during this pilot phase of the program participants must meet very specific eligibility criteria that has limited the number of potential students. Our research indicated a need to amend the formal selection procedures in order to maximize the number of participants.

In the Management Information Report of September 1990, the CJPC detailed the procedures for selecting inmates into the 3R program and recommended procedural changes. Initially inmates were screened based only on their parole plan. Thus, the Parole Division created a list of all inmates verified as paroling to Bexar or neighboring counties. The list was then reviewed for 3R eligible inmates. However, by the time an inmate was verified as eligible for participation using this procedure, he had most likely been paroled. The CJPC recommended that offenders who do not have a diploma or G.E.D., have an E.A. 6.0 or above, and were convicted from a pilot county be identified prior to having a valid parole plan, preferably during the diagnostic process. The CJPC also recommended that selection and placement be centralized at the office of the 3R counselor in the Windham School System. This would assure efficient, timely identification and placement of inmates into 3R. Based on these recommendations, selection procedures were modified so inmates are screened based on parole plan by the 3R counselor at the Windham School System.

In any program, especially one as comprehensive as 3R, identifying such implementation issues is vital to the ultimate success of the program. The CJPC reports to the Office of the Governor and the Texas Department of Commerce on program issues and potential problems, and makes recommendations that will guide in the decision-making process during implementation and expansion of 3R.

V. Preliminary Evaluation Results

Research for the 3R program is in its mid-stage. Several variables are being examined to measure program outcome. These include long-term measures of recidivism, educational and cognitive improvement, and overall behavior in the community. Data are being

collected from the Windham School System and other components of the Institutional Division, the Parole Division, and the 3R community sites by the CJPC research team. By March 1992, enough information will be compiled to report on the recidivism of offenders in the program (compared to a similar group that did not participate in the program) one year after program completion.

In-depth self-report interviews of 3R participants are another method of collecting data. Offenders in general have adopted lifestyles that involve drugs, alcohol, and crime. Traditional methods of education have been rejected by most, and education is not viewed as a necessary part of their life. The program participants interviewed about the program reported the following about the impact the program has had on their personal and work life:

- Many volunteered for 3R because they wanted to work on computers, learn how to type, and needed a G.E.D. Some volunteered because they thought it would have an effect on their parole. Regardless of their initial intent, all the participants interviewed felt that having a G.E.D. would enhance their opportunities in the job market and improve their skills.

- Participants indicated that they preferred computer-assisted instruction rather than traditional classroom instruction alone. Reasons for this included that they liked computer-assisted instruction because they could practice and get immediate feedback, which was especially helpful on math lessons. Moreover, they did not have to depend on the teacher in order to begin work upon entering class.

- All participants that have completed the program, except for one, reported that participating in 3R has helped decrease their criminal activity. Generally,

their family relations improved, employment opportunities improved, and for some, drug use decreased.

- The improvement in family relations reported was attributed to several factors. For some, making it through the program and earning a diploma was one of the most positive things that has happened to them and proved that they could accomplish a goal. For others it was being able to help their own children; still for others it was improved reading and math skills that help them function better in society.

The further analysis under way by the CJPC will show if the positive attitudes of the offenders toward the program will translate into a reduction of recidivism

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