

1 Opening

Hello everyone,

Welcome to this symposium on dyslexia in prisons.

The fact that you can get far in life, despite being burdened by the 'invisible' handicap that is dyslexia, has been proven by the many well-known examples of dyslexic stars in their respective professional fields. These include inventors Alexander Graham Bell and Albert Einstein in the previous century, but also more recent high-fliers such as astronaut Wubbo Ockels or film director Steven Spielberg.

Still, many people suffering from dyslexia could do with a little support. Misconceptions regarding dyslexia still exist - if not in the dyslexic person's environment, then often in the way they perceive themselves. People suffering from dyslexia may feel like outsiders, because in some areas they are unable to participate on equal terms with everyone else. Reading and comprehension are an important part of the educational process, which could easily cause dyslexics to think that they are not suited to further education. This may result in someone choosing a wrong direction.

For example, the chairman of 'Dyslexia Scotland', Sir Jackie Stewart, says: "It was touch and go.... I could have easily turned to crime." Being a multiple Grand Prix winner as well as a dyslexic, he knows what he is talking about.

2 MGW

So: let me start by briefly saying something about the prison system in the Netherlands. Here in the Netherlands, the government wants to invest in reducing recidivism by not just locking detainees away, but also offering them opportunities to change. This is called the prison-system modernisation programme (MGW). How do you get so-called repeat offenders to understand that there are ways to get out of the criminal life? That help is available? And how do you make them realise that this will allow them to build a good life, in which they will derive satisfaction from their work and gain the respect of those around them?

This change in attitude, this conscious decision to move away from criminality - the English call it desistance - must be based on a real desire to change; change by leaving the criminal environment and giving life a new meaning.

Desistance is the foundation that MGW is built on. Walking away from a life of crime demands a lot from an individual. We consider it our responsibility to help detainees make a new start, to support them in the change process. Behaviour interventions alone are not enough. Walking away from criminality is a difficult process of stumbling and getting back up again, that also continues outside the interventions. This way of thinking - which we refer to as a life course approach - requires a more comprehensive range of reintegration activities.

We offer detainees these reintegration options with our range of return-to-society activities. These are short-term, practical activities aimed at reintegration into society and include courses in Handling Money, Work & Income and Personal Hygiene. We teach people skills that they can actively use when they have to start participating in society once again.

We work with the detainees in a very targeted way. For example, in the compulsory first module, Choosing Change, they formulate their own plan, which they then have

to work on. They actually sign the plan to indicate their commitment. That way, it truly becomes their own detention and reintegration plan, targeted toward the five life areas: managing your own affairs, work & income, housing, healthcare and managing money.

In a world of prison cells and locks, motivation is key when it comes to reintegration activities. People have to be motivated and must make a conscious choice. We only invest in those people who truly want to turn their back on criminality and are prepared to turn their lives around. At the same time, no detainee is allowed to just get settled in and participate mindlessly in the daily routine, without at least some demands being made on him. We give everyone a chance; it is up to the individual to seize it.

Of course there are always those who don't want to learn or are unable to learn. It is the task of the detention staff and the teachers to be able to recognise these individuals in order to motivate them in the right way. For those who don't want to learn any possible barriers are removed, and for those with light mental impairments there are specially adapted reintegration activities.

To be able to determine whether the detainee is sufficiently motivated, we have developed three standard activities: first there is the Reflector, a digital questionnaire that helps the detainee to form an image of himself; secondly, we have the Choosing Change module, which looks at the results from the Reflector in more detail and; thirdly, the professional selection and competency test.

So why exactly are we doing all this? Very specifically: to reduce recidivism by 25% by 2020. We would prefer never to see a former detainee back in one of our institutions again, and to make society a safer place at the same time.

3 Dyslexia

As I mentioned in my introduction, there are dyslexics who do extremely well. There are foreign studies indicating that 30 to 40% of all self-made millionaires are dyslexic. But there are also studies that show us that 30 to 40% of all detainees are dyslexic. A screening for dyslexia in the Dutch Heerhugowaard custodial institution also reveals high numbers of dyslexia. For most of these detainees, education was a nightmare. In order to motivate the dyslexic inmates to learn and utilise their opportunities, the detention period offers some good options, not just involving the institutional teachers, but the entire environment in and around the penitentiary institute. Today marks the start of the pilot project, in which dyslexic inmates will receive the support they need.

Let me finish my presentation, so you can discuss the subject matter in further detail. I'm very happy to see you all here and am glad that we will be paying a lot of attention to dyslexia in detention situations. Valk&Uil and a group of institutional teachers have worked hard to make this pilot a reality and I would like to thank them for their commitment. I am extremely happy we can start this pilot and am very keen to see the results. This could make a great contribution to reducing recidivism, and we hope that many people will benefit from it, similarly to Sir Jackie Stewart. I wish all of you a lot of inspiration during this symposium.