

# FUNCTIONAL LITERACY & YOUTH OFFENDERS

By Edward Thomas<sup>1</sup>

## Abstract

One of the key findings of the Department of Communities and Local Government's Report into the 2011 riots found that a significant causal issue amongst those persons convicted of criminal offences during the riots of August 2011, was their lack of 'Functional Literacy'. This article looks at longitudinal study of convicted youth offenders from 1995 and 2006. It sets out to establish that there has been sufficient academic writing from Rutter (1975) to Goodman & Rugeiro (2010) coupled with the findings of successive Government Reports, including The Moser Report 1999, that have gone virtually unheeded by Governments of all political persuasions. These findings have been left to gather dust during periods of financial growth as well as recession for over more than thirty years. Why should the Department of Communities and Local Government's Report fare any better?

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## Background to the Original Research

Through nearly thirty years of street duty policing in the London Borough of Hackney and six years of employment as an instructor at an Outer London Junior Attendance Centre, an interest developed in young offender's apparent lack of 'functional literacy'. In 1995, I undertook a small scale empirical study to ascertain if there was any commonality of academic factors or antecedents which led the attendee's to their involvement in crime. Very few of the attendee's at the Attendance Centre where I was employed had parents with criminal records. It became apparent that many of the youths at the Attendance Centre were functionally illiterate at or below the Key Skills criteria in Further Education. The findings of this report were passed to the Home Office department responsible for education within the Criminal Justice System, but it has not been previously published.

This article seeks to make the connection between youths in the criminal justice system, who have been failed by the education system as being too challenging, and the need to offer literacy training to break their cycle of criminality.

This article will investigate whether the casual link claimed in the Communities and Local Government Report (2012) into the 2011 Riots exists between the inability of young people to read and write and the act of rioting in Croydon, Enfield, Tottenham and elsewhere in England, which followed the shooting by police of Mark Duggan in Tottenham Hale, North London 4th August 2011. It will examine if the Communities and Local Government Report (2012) is just another paper exercise in the litany of Governmental Reports and Academic Research into young men's lack of 'functional literacy' (Moser/DoEE 1999) and their descent into criminality.

This article employs two original sets of research that straddle the 1999 Moser Report to examine the correlation between Youth Offenders lack of functional literacy, their preponderance to truant and their descent into criminal activity. To achieve this, a small scale empirical study of youths sentenced to a period of hours at an Attendance Centre in 1995, The Moser Report into adult literacy in 1999; which commented on the poor levels of functional literacy amongst prisoners in their early twenties, and a small scale empirical study of youths under the supervision of a Youth Offending Team in Central London in 2006 are examined juxtaposed to academic writing and professional practitioner organisational reports on youth offending and 'functional literacy'.

The subject base for the small scale empirical studies that form the base for this article were Youth Offenders aged 12 to 17. All the youths who formed the subject base for the studies had either been sentenced to a term of hours at an Attendance Centre in 1995 or were subject to the supervision of a Youth Offender Team in the case of the 2006 study.

The two small-scale empirical studies were initially compared with the academic writing by Rutter (1975) and Reid (1986). Rutter (1975) in his 'Isle of Wight Study' looked at the correlation between conduct disorders and reading retardation, categorised as 'functional Illiteracy' in the Moser Report (1999), using two groups of Secondary School Children from the Isle of Wight and an Inner London Borough. Rutter (1975) noted that there was a linear correlation between children from dysfunctional families, truancy and later involvement in crime. Reid's (1986) study examined the causes and characteristics of Truancy. In Rutter's

(2004) collaboration with Dr Henri Giller, a Criminologist, and Ann Hagell, Co-director of the Policy Research Bureau who specialises in youth offenders and anti-social behaviour, he revisited and re-examined the themes of his 1975 Isle of Wight Study.

Rutter identified a linear correlation between 'conduct disorder', sibling status and functional illiteracy (Rutter 1975, p 184); (Rutter et al 2004, pp181 & 231). A substantial percentage of the children in Rutter's sample who displayed 'conduct disorder' and were functionally illiterate were either the middle child of three (Rutter 1975, p 184) or the fourth or successive child in a large sibling group (Rutter 1975, p 185). None of the writing used to support the two small-scale empirical studies or the studies themselves would seek to suggest that every middle child of three, or fourth or successive child in a large family will become a truant or become a criminal; nor would they seek to suggest that every young person who is not functionally literate is involved in criminality. However, a substantial number of youth offenders are functionally illiterate and emanate from one of these sibling groups (Moser/DoEE 1999); (Department of Communities & Local Government [on-line] 2012).

### **Functional Literacy**

The Moser Report (Moser/DoEE 1999) asserts that a person is functionally literate, if given the alphabetical index to the Yellow Pages, they were unable to locate the page reference for plumbers; or if shown a poster for a concert, they would not be able to identify the location of the show.

To give an indication of where the Youths at the Attendance Centre's literacy abilities fell, the participants were asked four questions loosely based on the level of comprehension and written ability in English for Key Skills in Communications Qualification in Further Education. A student that can achieve level 1 in Key Skills Communications would be able to write an informal note to a friend or relative, unaided. These are more than highly desirable skills

Approximately forty five per cent of the participants were only capable of working towards, but not necessarily achieving, a level 1 in communications. At Level 2 at Keys Skills in Communication would be described as "functional literacy". This means that an individual can read and have sufficient skills to function within a society. Woosey (2005) stated,

'In a recent study it was discovered that one in seven school leavers didn't have the necessary literacy skills demanded in the work place.'

Woosey (BBC Education on-line 2005)

In 2009, there were approximately 67 million adults living the UK, with approximately 8 million of the UK's adult population are considered to be functionally illiterate. That translates to approximately 12% of the adult population being functionally illiterate. One in five adults in Britain had low to very poor literacy standards. 3,800 people aged between 16 and 65, who had been educated in Britain, were tested, the results indicated that about 8.4 million Britons of working age (22%) are incapable of comparing and contrasting two pieces of information; the basic standard for Key Skills Level 2 in Communications. A similar percentage of this sample of Youth Offenders was unable to fill in a simple form correctly.

On 18<sup>th</sup> July 2007 the Department of Innovation, Universities and Skills implemented the review of functional literacy undertaken on behalf of the DES by Lord Leitch, entitled 'World Class Skills';

*World Class Skills* represents a hugely significant milestone in the development of the *Skills for Life* strategy, with the ambition that 95% of adults in England will, as a minimum, achieve 'functional' literacy and numeracy skills by 2020.

The Leitch Review (2006)

## Findings

From the 1996 sample of 83 Youth Offenders at the Attendance Centre, 16 indicated in the questionnaire that they were unable to read or write. The Basic Skills Agency indicates that 1 in 6 of the UK population have a 'functional illiteracy': 16% of the adult population. In the case of the Attendance Centre 19.2% were functionally illiterate. The Islington YOT's sample indicated approximately 23% were functionally illiterate.

### Youths at the Attendance Centre

Permission to carry out my research at the Attendance Centre was granted as I was the serving deputy officer in charge of the centre. The officer in charge of the Outer London Junior Attendance Centre acted as the gatekeeper for this research (Silverman 2005, p255), facilitating clearance with the Home Office Education Department on the understanding that the research was conducted under strict anonymity and that the completed report was passed to the Home Office for scrutiny. The research was not funded by the Home Office, I covered all expenses incurred.

The youths sentenced to a term of hours at Attendance Centre between 1992 and 1996 appeared to lack what the Moser Report (1999) later termed 'functional literacy'. A small-scale empirical study was undertaken to ascertain if there was any commonality of academic factors or antecedents which led the attendee's to their involvement in crime (Jupp et al 2003, p7). Very few of the attendee's had parents with criminal records. It became apparent that many had functional literacy at or below Key Skills Level 1 (Pizzichini 2006); (Basic Skills Agency 2006); (Hurry et al 2005, p6); (Moser/DoEE 1999).

Circulations from NACRO, the National Association for the Care and Resettlement of Offenders (1991) in addition to much of what Rutter (1975, p102) and Rutter et al (2004, p88) had to say, confirmed observations that an element of the boys at the Attendance Centre were truants; some displayed severe problems with reading and writing. The focus of the survey shifted and was enlarged to investigate a correlation between these repeat offenders disaffection with education, truancy and their apparent lack of literacy skills (Jupp et al 2003, p26). The 2006 survey of twenty Youths attending Islington Youth Offender Team Projects repeated and confirmed many of the findings from the 1995 survey. The two surveys were examined, juxtaposed to the finding of Rutter, Giller & Hagell (2004); and Hurry, Brazier,

Snapes & Wilson's (2005) report for the National Research and Development Centre for Literacy and Numeracy, at the Institute of Education.

Gulliford (1985 p50) makes the an important point that 40% of the participants aged 10 to 17 years old with conduct disorders also had severe reading difficulties. This added to the findings set out by Rutter (1975, p275). Using the same methodology and criteria for assessment, the incidents of those with dysfunctional behaviour who also experience reading difficulties was doubled when applied to a sample of London children, in his 'Isle of Wight Study' (Hurry et al 2005, p6); (Lee 2006, p8); (Lenney 2006, p14); (Rutter 1975, p275); (Rutter et al 2004, p231).

The Basic Skills Agency's figures for the reading ability of the adult population indicates that 16% of the adult population have a 'low reading ability' or 'functional illiteracy' (Moser/DoEE (1999); (The Basic Skills Agency 2005); (Hurry et al 2005, p6).

Hagell et al (1994) citing Tarling (1993) had discussed national average ages for Youth Offenders in their findings from interviewing a sample of seventy eight 'Frequent Offenders' aged 12 to 18 to be,

'The average age of their sample groups was 15 <sup>1</sup>/<sub>2</sub> years old and that the peak age for taking part in criminal activities for Youth offenders was 15 years old'.

Hagell et al (1994) citing Tarling (1993)

Dunn (1981, p2) added to the discussion, in that that truants were rarely found under the ages of 8 or 9. The main age range for her study was that children aged 14 to 16 truanted more frequently than other age groups. Dunn (ibid) goes on to say, the truants tend to display anti-social behaviour and express little or no interest in school activities. She also found that a high, but unspecified, proportion of children appearing before, what were then known as Juvenile Courts, had a history of truancy (Rutter 1975, p275); (Hurry et al 2005, p6); (Lee 2006, p8); (Lenney 2006, p14); (Rutter et al 2004, p231).

Rutter (1975) identifies a correlation between their dysfunctional behaviour and their disaffection with the education system. The survey questionnaires were worded to attempt to identify this correlation, to see if this was the catalyst that caused them to truant and had they become disaffected with education and truanted at a stage where their literacy had yet to develop (Rutter 1975, p242).

### Larger Families

Rutter (1975, pp184/5) supported the view that larger families tended to be disorganised, which could then lead to some elements of the sibling group becoming dysfunctional. The children can be disadvantaged in several ways; they tend to have a lower verbal intelligence score and poorer levels of functional literacy Moser/DfES (1999) and there is a higher risk of delinquency and conduct disorder. The lower level of oracy skills appear to be as a result of confusion due to the cacophony of numerous raised voices talking at once in the family home. Rutter (1975, pp182/3). Rutter et al (2004) suggested that parents in large families tend to spend less time with individual children developing or adequately stimulating their linguistic skills, consequently the child's speech patterns and ideas are less developed (Rutter et al 2004, p181).

Rutter (1975) went on to note a correlation between large families and delinquency. This followed on in part from the child's reading failure; children who are poor readers tend to develop conduct disorders. Another factor may have been that the larger families in his study tended to be less well organised and have difficulty with discipline due to more frequent discord and disharmony (Rutter et al 2004, p181).

#### Disaffection With Education

Youths at the Attendance Centre, between 1992 and 1998, displayed a pattern of becoming disaffected with school for reasons that are as disparate as they are legion, what Reid (1986, p3) calls 'a multi-causal and multi-dimensional problem'. As students, they were absent from lessons and were unable catch up. They became involved in confrontations with the individual teachers and gained a reputation amongst the teaching staff, as challenging. They truanted, only to hang around in groups on street corners. Through boredom, they drifted into crime (Rutter et al 2004, p231); (Reid 1986, p17).

Dunn (1981, p2) added to the argument that, when questioned, truants cited boring lessons, useless and difficult subjects, dislike of and conflict with certain teachers allied with more interesting activities outside school, as the main reason for them absenting themselves from school (Rutter 1975, p242).

Reid (2004, pp120/1) stated, that disruptive children tended to be socially inept, lacking the skills to handle difficult situations. Some became abusive to the point of belligerence, on occasions, when disciplined as their normal default reflex reaction. Some disruptive children felt the need to defend their position regardless of the cause as part of the 'it's not my fault' mindset.

#### Non Participant Observations

N A C R O circulations (1991) and much of what Rutter (1975) had to say confirmed the non-participant observations that a significant element of the boys at the Attendance Centres were truants; some of these youths displayed severe problems with reading and writing. The focus of the survey shifted and enlarged to investigate a correlation between this group of repeat offenders' disaffection with education, truanting and their apparent lack of functional literacy skills. The 2006 survey of twenty youths attending Islington Youth Offender Team Projects repeated and confirmed many of the findings from the 1995/6 survey. The two surveys were examined and compared to the finding of Rutter, Giller and Hagell (2004), Hurry, Brazier, Snapes and Wilson (2005) report for the National Research and Development Centre for Literacy and Numeracy, at the Institute of Education.

#### Attendance Centre Classes

Part of my duties as an Instructor and later the Deputy Officer in Charge of the Outer London Attendance Centre included running a 'Citizenship' class. The 'Citizenship' classes at the Attendance Centre had evolved into a current affairs quiz running the gambit of hard news and controversy to sports and entertainment, followed by a discussion element developing from the answers. During the initial Citizenship lessons an attempt was made to tackle the issues of drugs and the effect that their crime had on their victims. Some hostility to these lessons was expected, but the lessons were greeted with disengaged silence (Weber 1978, p5).

The boys in the class were either unwilling or unable to enter into any form of debate. On the rare occasions when one of them had anything to say, they were given the floor and actively encouraged to speak: Although, they were stopped if they started swearing. It was explained to them, that swearing was not acceptable behaviour. The boys were encouraged to continue. Again, there was no response (ibid).

It is perhaps accepted that there are rare occasions where the use of an expletive to punctuate a sentence to give vent to and deliver its author's intentions is unmatched by any other utterance. In this instance, partly due to the lack of oracy skills, this was expletives frugally peppered with speech (D of E 1992).

From observations of the boys at the Attendance Centre lack of 'functional literacy' the citizenship lessons changed and contained a current affairs quiz taken from the newspaper and media news broadcasts in the two weeks preceding the youth's attendance at the Centre. The youths were like fish in a very small pond; unaware of the world beyond their immediate parochial surroundings (Gulliford 1985, p141); (Ball 1981, p38-39).

The boys had been warned in advance for the commencement of the current affairs quiz in the Citizenship Classes. They were advised to try to look at a newspaper or a news broadcast in the days preceding the Saturday of the Attendance Centre. They were given direct questions like; 'Who is the prime minister?' One or two of the boys would shout out the answer, but very few would write it down. It was difficult to comprehend if this reluctance to write the answer down was due to; not hearing the question and or the answer, lack of writing skills, poor spelling or peer group pressure not to take part. The Attendance Centre youths were questioned about their lack of involvement as a class. The printable replies were; 'it's boring,' 'don't read the newspapers,' 'don't watch the television news,' and 'don't listen to the news on the radio.'

One youth indicated that he could not read or write and when questioned as a group, another two or three nodded agreement. At least half the class also indicated that they had difficulty reading and writing.

Through observations and the receipt of anecdotal evidence whilst working in the police and as an instructor in Attendance Centres, a picture had been presented of the adolescent criminal as a person who in the main was from a dysfunctional family and social background, who was likely to be illiterate or, at best, semi-literate. What the Moser Report (1999) later termed 'functionally illiterate'.

At the Attendance Centre when the topic of truancy came up in the news and therefore in my class session, the boys said that 'school was boring'. They found 'hanging out' with their mates preferable to work in school, which they found arduous and of little or no relevance to them. Their perception was of no social opportunities coupled with lack of meaningful, well paid work in an environment of high youth unemployment.

#### The Attendance Centre Sentence

An Attendance Centre Order is usually handed down by Magistrates at a Youth Court. It is one of a raft of non-custodial sentences, which now falls under the control of the local Youth Offending Team Manager. It originally stood alone and was set up to deal with what was perceived as football hooligan in the late 1960's and 1970's spirally out of control. The Outer

London Attendance Centre that I worked at was one of two set up to run at the same time as local professional football team's home games on alternative Saturdays from 2pm to 4pm: Football at this time was played traditionally on Saturday at 3pm. The Attendance Centres were set up with the intention to prevent the youth convicted of offences at or around a professional football game attending the match on a Saturday. As the landscape of professional football and youth offending developed, the Outer London Attendance Centre changed its' opening times to 9am on alternative Saturdays, once a fortnight, for two hours. The Attendance Centre sentence was used in many cases as a last resort, prior to a custodial sentence.

#### Attendance Centre Questionnaires

I completed the literacy questionnaire with all new attendee on the first day of their order, after they had been convicted and sentence through the Youth Courts during November and December 1995. The officers in charge of the remaining six Greater London Attendance Centres had been contacted in the early summer period and all agreed to have an Attendance Centre member of staff complete the literacy questionnaires with every youth making their first appearance at their respective Attendance Centres. This was co-ordinated so that the literacy questionnaires that they completed were also for new offenders immediately following their conviction and sentencing at the Youth Courts, during November and December 1995.

In February 1996, eighty three returned and completed questionnaires had been received. This represented all newly sentenced Youths who made their first attendance at one of the seven Attendance Centres within the Greater London area under an order from a Youth Court during November and December 1995. Youths making their first attendance, post sentencing went through a rigorous induction process and interview by the officer in charge of the centre, or the deputy officer. The interviewing officers at each of the seven other Greater London Area Attendance Centres were asked to complete the questionnaires with the youths during the induction process. I was responsible for the initial interview at the Outer London Attendance Centre, so that in addition to completing the literacy questionnaires, I conducted a semi-structured interview with all the youths who made their first attendance during this period. Forty seven of the youths who completed the questionnaires, either in person or with the Attendance Centre Officer completing the forms on their behalf were aged 15 and 16. This age group constitutes 56.6% of the sample. It is fair to make the assumption that some of the 16 year old boys could have been 15 at time of the commission of the offences at the time of their sentence.

The participants were questioned about the size of their family and its sibling construct. Specific questions were not asked about extended, fragmented or satellite families as result of the re-marriage or cohabiting of their parents. There were four further qualifying questions about the gender make up and their position chronologically within their sibling group. Seventy seven out of the sample of eighty three participants of this survey had brothers or sisters. Out of this group, sixty six or approximately 80% of this sample came from the potentially dysfunctional sibling groups: Thirty five of the participants were middle children and thirty one of the participants came from a large family with three or more siblings.

When examining the Attendance Centre participants reading habits it was apparent that very few of them read books of any description. To get an indication of their reading habits, the Youths were asked if they read a newspaper or magazine. About 30% of the participants said

at least once a week, approximately 60% said occasionally and 10% said they never read anything.

Rutter (1975) and Reid (1986) both agree that there is mounting evidence that absenteeism is a major problem in British schools, 60% of the Attendance Centre sample admitted to being regular or long term truants.

The youths at the Attendance Centre all had English as their first language. Sixteen youths indicated that they were functionally illiterate. That represents 19.2% of the survey group. The 2006 Basic Skills Agency gave the figure for functional illiteracy nationally as 12%. In other words, the standard of functional literacy amongst the group of youths sentenced to an Attendance Centre Order during November and December 1995 was 50% higher than for the general population.

### Meaningful Qualifications to Aid Meaningful Employment

Reading the Moser Report (1999) led to an increasing sense of incredulity. The small scale empirical study into the lack of basic skills amongst youth offenders, in 1995, was undertaken, in part, to provide the Home Office with evidence of the need for meaningful education for illiterate youth offenders. The belief was, naively, that if the Home Office were provided with evidence that a sizeable proportion of youth offenders had been failed by the education system, something would be done about educating them. Those youths that do not want to re-offend and want to avoid entering the quicksand of custodial institutionalism need to be taught to read and write. They need the ability to attain creditable qualifications to enable them to obtain meaningful employment. What was and is being undertaken in Attendance Centres, is 'occupying their time' doing sit ups, racing 'shuttle runs' and making 'Blue Peter-esque' 'circuit-testers'. The '*Hardened*' Offender [because that is what s/he is by the time the majority of youth offenders are sentenced to an Attendance Centre Order] only gets education within the justice system once s/he is 'banged up'. If they are 'lucky enough' not to be in an overcrowded institution, they might get one or two hours tuition a week. If the prisoners are 'lucky enough' to be serving a long enough sentence; they might be entered for and 'achieve' a Further Education Key Skills Level 1 'Communication' or 'Application of Number' Award. Prisoners are not stupid. They know that they are not going to get employment with a National Certificate in Further Education [KS 1] Communication. Some employers were referring to the General National Vocational Qualifications [GNVQs] as a qualification for those 'Going Nowhere Very Quickly', within a year of the introduction of the qualification. Hurry et al (2005, p11); Pizzichini (2006, p5). Having taught FE Key Stage 2 and 3 Communication and Application of Number, It is apparent that they are not as creditable as a GCSE or AS Level English or Maths. It is accepted that any tuition and qualification is a step in the right direction. However, if Government, regardless of party, is serious about educating people with low or very low literacy or numeracy skills and want to achieve, If they serious about, 'the elements that are essential for ensuring high quality, being,

- clear, unambiguous national quality standards
- a well-defined curriculum and
- a creditable set of qualifications'

Moser Report (1999, Pt1 p33)

Education for offenders with low literacy skills should be taken seriously and needs to be properly funded.

The 'policy permeating everything in post-compulsory education and training' is split into 'lifelong learning' and four domains:

1. Access –who gets in?
2. Curriculum – to study what and how?
3. Resources – how funded?
4. Structure – how organised and governed?

Marsh (2000, p66)

The youths sentenced to a term of hours at the Attendance Centres were falling at the first hurdle. Not only were they not gaining access to Further Education, at this time, but there was no funding available specifically to youth offenders who were not serving a custodial sentence, for literacy training.

If any demographic group were in need of lifelong learning (Marsh 2000, p65) to assist them into meaningful work, it is the youth offenders who have been failed by education or for whom education has passed them by. What has been offered to date has been ineffectual.

The Moser Report (DfES, 1999) stated that too many adults were functionally illiterate. Moser made wide-ranging recommendations that may now be having a major impact on adult basic skills. Younger people (16 to 20-year olds) were seen as a particular priority and this is endorsed by the criminal justice system since Home Office statistics show that young men aged between 10 and 20 commit 42 per cent of all indictable offences (Kurtz 2002, pp 33 & 672). Offenders have also been identified as a group requiring attention 'as a matter of urgency' DfES (2003) because their literacy skills were under-developed compared with those of their non-offending peers.

One of the measures being explored to reduce youth offending is the provision of education and training. The purpose of this study is therefore twofold:

1. To explore ways of improving the literacy and numeracy skills of young offenders with underdeveloped basic skills.
2. To see what impact literacy and numeracy have on economic activity and offending over time.

Hurry et al (2005, p6)

Jane Hurry and her colleague's at The Institute of Education's 'National Research and Development Centre for Literacy and Numeracy' (NRDC), have undertaken a similar survey into 'functional literacy' in offenders. In their study, one hundred and ninety nine young people participated in the study: ninety one in the community and one hundred and eight in custody. The average age of the young people was 17, and they ranged from 15 to 18 years old. All had been convicted of an offence and were under an order, either in the community or at a secure estate (prison). Most were male (96 per cent) and white (93 per cent), although this ethnic mix would have changed as they processed the data from London (Hurry et al 2005, p11).

Hurry et al (2005) NRDC study defined under-developed basic skills as a score at Level 1 or below on the Basic Skills Agency (BSA). About two-thirds of the juvenile offenders screened in the NRDC study met this criterion. A minority (12 per cent) were at Entry Level 1. The NRDC study found that despite the fact that the initial assessment is a fairly crude test, it showed reasonable reliability and validity in that it was highly predictive of performance four or five months later. Their participant's estimates of how easy they found reading and writing agreed well with their performance on the BSA test were on the whole accurate. (ibid)

#### 'New Offenders Learning and Skills' Service

The House of Commons Public Accounts Committee (2009) recognised that under funding in prison education remained a major contributory factor in offender's lack of functional literacy. Lee (TES/FE Focus: 25 July 2009). Whilst it was acknowledge that a large proportion of offenders have poor functional literacy, it appeared that there was only limited progress through the Learning and Skills Council's, 'New Offenders Learning and Skills' Service. However, service providers such as Lewisham College, who were providing training for HMP Belmarsh and Brixton, had to withdraw from the New Offenders Learning and Skills Service, because the funding was insufficient (ibid). Under the Government's 2008 'Skills For Life: Progress in Improving Adult Literacy and Numeracy' programme, only one in five of prisoners in English goals who were previously identified to have very low 'basic skills' had enrolled on any course that would improve their functional literacy (Leigh 2009, p6)

#### YOT Questionnaires

The Youth Offending Team (YOT) Manager for an Inner London Borough was employed as a Visiting Lecturer at Middlesex University. After a brief conversation, he agreed to give access to youths attending the Inner London YOTs on the understanding that he or his staff completed the questionnaires with the youth offenders. Whilst this meant that the research was undertaken at arms length, I received all of the completed questionnaires for processing in the same way that the majority of the questionnaires in the 1996 sample were completed. The YOTs Manager acted as the gatekeeper for this research (Silverman 2005, p255). This part of the research was unfunded apart from the cost of producing the questionnaires which were paid by me.

The 2006 Questionnaires consolidated and confirmed much of the findings of the 1996 study. Twenty one of the twenty two participants had siblings. Over sixty per cent of the sample had three or more siblings and approximately twenty per cent were middle children. Approximately eighty five per cent of this group admitted to being truants. Approximately twenty three per cent admitted to being functionally illiterate. All of the participants had English as their first language.

#### Functional Literacy

To give an indication of where their literacy abilities fell, the participants were asked questions loosely based on the level of comprehension and written ability in English Skills in Communications Qualification in Further Education. A student that can achieve level 1 in Key Skills Communications would be able to write an informal note to a friend or relative, unaided. A student, who could achieve level 1 in Key Skills Communications and be at an

acceptable level to proceed to level 2, should be able to write a letter and be capable of comparing and contrasting two pieces of information. A level 2 student in Key Skills Communications should be able to complete a job application form, where it requires the applicant to write about their suitability for the vacancy. Level 2 in Key Skills Communications would be pitched somewhere around the ability to achieve grade 'C' at GCSE. A level 3 student in Key Skills Communications would be capable of working towards an AS level and should be able to write an essay of approximately 1,000 words.

Approximately forty five per cent of the participants were only capable of working towards, but not necessarily achieving, a level 1 in communications. At Level 2 at Keys Skills in Communication would be described as "functional literacy". This means that an individual can read and have sufficient skills to function within a society. Woosey (2005) stated,

‘In a recent study it was discovered that one in seven school leavers didn't have the necessary literacy skills demanded in the work place.’

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*World Class Skills* represents a hugely significant milestone in the development of the *Skills for Life* strategy, with the ambition that 95% of adults in England will, as a minimum, achieve 'functional literacy' and numeracy skills by 2020.

The Leitch Review (2006)

The 1996 interviews attempted to investigate a correlation between the repeat youth offenders lack literacy skills, their disaffection with the education system and their involvement in crime.

#### Lack of Reading Skills

The boys at the Outer London Attendance Centre appeared to have had very little perception of the world outside their immediate circle of friends or their immediate environment. In the current affairs quiz one or two of the boys would shout out the answer but very few would write anything down. It was not known if this reluctance to write the answers down was due to not hearing the question (or the answer), a lack of writing skills, poor spelling or peer group pressure not to take part. When asked about their lack of involvement it was apparent that the

youths took no interest in the wider world and that a sizeable minority of the boys had difficulty reading and writing.

Gulliford (1985) argues that 40% of boys with conduct disorder also have severe reading difficulties. Rutter (1975) adds to the argument that when using the same methodology and criteria for assessment of a sample of children from London, the incidents of boys with dysfunctional behaviour and reading difficulties was doubled.

From the 1996 sample of 83 Youth Offenders at the Attendance Centre, 16 indicated in the questionnaire that they had difficulty with their reading. It is accepted that these figures will not carry as much weight as those findings from academically supervised reading tests. However, The Basic Skills Agency indicates that 1 in 6 of the UK population have a 'functional illiteracy': 16% of the adult population. In the case of the Attendance Centre 19.2% were functionally illiterate. The Islington YOT's sample indicated approximately 23% were functionally illiterate.

#### Family Size and Reading Difficulties

The view that families and sibling status impact on learning appeared to have lost some favour, but again this theory was raised by Pitts (2003) who proffered that youths who are the product of dysfunctional families tend to fail to properly develop their reading and interpersonal skills (Pitts 2003, pp90/1) and was again commented on in The Department of Communities and Local Government Report (2012) which states,

“We heard from many communities where people felt that rioter behaviour could ultimately be ascribed to poor parenting. In a wide survey of over 900 young people, 58 per cent supported this view”.

The Department of Communities and Local Government Report (2012, p12)

Rutter (1975) attributed lower levels of literacy are attributable to noise at saturation level for a child, with numerous voices vying in crescendo for primacy. In addition, it appeared that parents of large families are less able to spend time developing and stimulating individual children's linguistic skills. In consequence the child's speech patterns and ideas are less developed. The correlation between large families and delinquency follows on in part from the child's reading failure: Children who are poor readers tend to develop conduct disorder. A further contributing factor may be that large families tend to be less well organised and have difficulty with discipline due to more frequent incidences of discord and disharmony (Rutter 1995, p184)

The 1995 Attendance Centre survey displayed a link through family size, undeveloped reading ability and conduct disorder in the majority of the two small scale empirical studies used in this article.

When the low reading ability figures from the 1996 Attendance Centre survey were projected to the population of England and Wales they represented an increase to 1 in 5.1 [18.75%] adults with a low reading ability. In 1996 that represented an increase, on the 1987 figures of 6.5 million, to 7.8 million adults in England and Wales with a low reading ability. In 1995 this figure was almost equivalent to the population of London.

In the 2006 questionnaire, some of the participants indicated that their reading and writing ability was below what is considered 'functional literacy'. If translated to the whole of the Youth Offending demographic, this would represent a figure of 41% as being 'functionally illiterate' compared to 22% of the general population.

### Truancy

The 'fantasy' that all truants are difficult pupils is not true in the majority of cases. Many are victims of unfortunate social, psychological and educational circumstances; born losers who are shy and inward looking (Anderson et al 2005, p2); (Reid 1986 p19). Their difficult label grew out of research into absenteeism on 'clinical' samples of the worst and most hardened cases who were often truant-delinquents. No apology is offered here for perpetuating the 'myth' by this survey. The subject base of the 1996 Attendance Centre survey, were the very difficult adolescent-truants described. They may well present themselves as inadequate when interviewed, but let us not lose sight of the reason why these Youths were at the Attendance Centre in the first place: Young offenders who passed through the Attendance Centre between 1992 and 1998 included a sixteen year old youth who stole a Range Rover, ram raided an out of town electrical store, stole electrical goods for which the value was estimated in the thousands of pounds and challenged police officers with a shotgun when forced to stop on the A 13; or a 15 year old youth who drove stolen cars dangerously passed police vehicles to get them to 'chase' him into an industrial estate where a group of youths were waiting to attack the police officers. Both young men were separately sentenced to a 36 hour Attendance Centre Order. Neither could read nor write. Their 'Pre Sentence Reports' talked of their rage due to an inability to communicate or comprehend the written page. The 15 year old youth had previously beaten a school colleague because he believed that he was writing notes about him and passing them around the class.

In the 1996 Attendance Centre survey, 60% of the youths surveyed admitted to being truants who absented themselves at an earlier age than in surveys of non-delinquent or mixed background groups. In the 2006 survey all those who truanted, 77%, did so at an earlier age in surveys of non-delinquent or mixed background groups (Rutter et al, 2004 p88).

From both surveys a pattern emerged of youths becoming disaffected with school for reasons that are as disparate as they are legion: A multi-causal and multi-dimensional problem. Unable to catch-up on class work through missing the odd lesson they become involved in confrontations with individual teachers, thus gaining a reputation amongst the teaching staff. They truant to hang around on street corners and become involved in crime (Reid 1986, p17).

### Functional Reading Ability and Conduct Disorder

The most constant associations with conduct disorder are 'educational difficulties'. There is a correlation between lack of 'functional reading ability' and conduct disorder. Family size can be seen to contribute and educational failure can lead onto disillusionment and resentment through to rebellion, aggression and delinquent behaviour (Rutter 2004, p183); (Pitts 2003, pp90/1). This was evident every time a youth was challenged for failing to conform to the rules of the Attendance Centre. Some would confront those enforcing the discipline in a way that conforms with the characteristics of Reid's (1986) Institutional Truant, who are

challenging and confrontational, sometimes threatening to the point of belligerence. They have total disregard for authority or the outcome of any punitive measures.

In 1995 there was mounting evidence that absenteeism was a major problem in British schools. This was coupled with under achievement, seen as the disease of the age among middle and lower ability pupils. In 2006, 30% of offenders were regular truants compared with 2% of the general population. Nearly half of male prisoners were excluded from school, compared to 1% of the non-offending general population. Over half of the prisoners in the UK have no qualifications at all (Lee 2006, p9).

Disruptive children tend to be socially inept, lacking the skills to handle difficult situations. Some become abusive when disciplined by way of a normal reaction. Some disruptive children feel the need to defend their position regardless of the cause as part of the 'it's not my fault' mindset (Reid 1986).

The populist media pander to the prophets of doom with statements that talk about how 'things' have deteriorated within recent years; or the 'red-tops' paparazzi who proffer that things have deteriorated over the last twenty years or the last decade. If we look at public disorder or aggressive behaviour recent headlines are full, rightly, of the horrors of knife crime, in 2005 we had riots in places like Bradford, in the 1990's we had the 'Poll Tax Riots', in the 1980's we had riots in Brixton, Toxteth and elsewhere in England, football hooliganism in the 1970's, the 'Mods and Rockers' at Brighton and elsewhere in the 1960's, in the mid 1950's the news was full of the horror of gangs of knife wielding youths, called 'Teddy Boys' (Cohen 2002). In the mid 1950's it was the riots in West London - the Notting Hill 'Race Riots' (Cannon 1997). Charles Booth, a social historian, took a team of social investigators into the East End of London in the 1880s to live in the community and observe the people over several years. Their findings disclosed an underclass falling into eight categories below what we today would describe as the 'working class'. Drug abuse was rife. Then it was opium, today it is the opium derivative of heroin, or cocaine. Then, there were problems of youth unemployment, blind alley occupations and appalling housing conditions. This and other forms of anti-social behaviour were blamed, as today, on single parent families and immigration (Fishman 1988, pp 1-18); (Muncie 1999, p p138/9); (Pitts 2003, p90); (Stott et al 1975, p137); (Young 1999, p83).The BBC News Headline for 24<sup>th</sup> October 2011 was,

England rioters 'poorer, younger, less educated'

The report continued that, 66% of those arrested for the 2011 summer riots had some form of special educational needs, compared against the national average of 21%. Of the youths arrested for the 2011 summer riots, 66% had been excluded from school between 2009 and 2010, compared to the national average of 6%; and 20% of those youths arrested as a result of the 2011 summer riots had been permanently excluded from education (Sellgren/BBC on-line 2012).

Training convicted offenders, not occupying their time, should be paramount. What purpose does a compulsory P.E. lesson serve in the Attendance Centre Order other than vacuous discipline? Reid (1986) talks of boredom being rife in schools keeping good company with purposeless activities. Physical Education and good citizenship should be complementary to basic education. Teaching those offenders who can't read to do so and encouraging those youths disaffected with education it's worth, should have primacy. Providing youth offenders

with a chance to make a contribution to society after they have been punished seems the least that should be achieved (Hurry 2005, p6).

It would be wrong to suggest that the only people who are not 'functionally literate' or who have basic skills needs are convicted offenders. The Moser Report (DfEE 1999, Pt4 p11) acknowledges that functionally illiterate adults are treated as a single homogenous group, when they are as disparate as they are legion.

The House of Commons Public Accounts Committee (2009) recognised that under funding in prison education remains a major contributory factor in offender's lack of functional literacy. Lee (TES/FE Focus: 25 July 2009). Whilst it is acknowledge that a large proportion of offenders have poor functional literacy, it appears that there is only limited progress through the Learning and Skills Council's, 'New Offenders Learning and Skills' Service. However, service providers such as Lewisham College, who were providing training for HMP Belmarsh and Brixton, have had to withdraw because the funding is insufficient (ibid). Under the Government's 2008 'Skills For Life: Progress in Improving Adult Literacy and Numeracy' programme, only one in five of prisoners in English goals who were previously identified to have very low 'basic skills' had enrolled on any course that would improve their functional literacy (Leigh 2009, p6).

## CONCLUSION

The participants of the small scale empirical studies that conducted had been sentenced through the criminal courts to undertake training or supervision in institution of Criminal Justice: Attendance Centres and Youth Offender Team Projects. The contention of this study is that the participant's mainly dysfunctional family backgrounds have been contributory to their 'functional illiteracy' this in turn has led to their challenging behaviour in school, their truancy and their offending.

The majority of the participants in this study had become active in crime whilst absenting themselves from school. This survey has confirmed much of what Rutter (1985 & 2004) and others had stated previously. Fiona Leney (2006) wrote in the 'Times Education Supplement F.E. Focus on Education in Prisons', that 30% of offenders were regular truants compared with 2% of the general population of the UK. 49% of offenders were excluded from school. The figure is 1% for the general population of the U.K. Sixty per cent of prisoners in British gaols were and are 'Functionally Illiterate'. Nick Hilbourne and Shafik Meghji (2006, p9) in the same publication two weeks earlier, told the story of 'Kenny' a twenty eight year old reformed offender who did not learn to read until he was twenty one. His education stopped at the age of fourteen due to a plethora of circumstances, not least his truanting, offending and placement in secure care.

Both reports not only highlight the problem of 'functional illiteracy' leading to Youth Offending, but illuminate the higher instance of re-offending. The National Children's Bureau [NCB] Report (2005) highlighted the devastating effect of the lack of education in Youth Offenders leading to custody, and of custody having a devastating impact on Youth Offenders access to education. This, in turn, impacted on the Youth Offenders prospect of employment on release: This completes the circle by impacting on the rate of recidivism. In the NCB Report, sixty per cent of 15 to 18 year old Youth Offenders with 'functional illiteracy' had re-offended within three months of release (ibid); Hillbourne & Meghji (2006 p9).

The underlying cause appears to be that these youths are the product of dysfunctional families (Rutter et al 2004, p183); (Pitts 2003, pp90/1) where their reading and inter-personal skills have failed to develop. Better remedial literacy training in early adolescence may provide some of the answers. However, successive Governments have called for repeated reports into functional illiteracy but failed to implement their findings.

Attendance Centres are currently under the control of the YOT. Fundamentally, little has change in the Attendance Centre's ethos over the fifty years of their existence. Attendance Centres were set up to 'occupy' football hooligans on a Saturday, thus preventing them from attending matches. From speaking to former colleagues at Attendance Centre's there is a proposal to introduce a system wide series of educational 'schemes of work' with 'learning outcomes'. Hopefully, the circle of 'occupying' youth offenders will be broken. The schemes of work will include literacy skills and not just perpetuate the futile occupation of the production circuit testers or garden trowels and forks (Aubeelack 2009); (Usher 2009).

The notion of punishment for criminal wrong doing is fully accepted, but education, leading to rehabilitation, must be given equal status in the treatment of these young men whether you call them criminals, dysfunctional, functional illiterate or, what Rutter (1975, p242); Rutter et al (2004, p1/2) calls, conduct disordered.

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## **INTERVIEWS**

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