**Type of Contribution: PAPER**

**Portrait of the Incarcerated Woman as a Reading Mother: Revealing the Perceived Outcomes of a Shared Reading Program**

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**Keywords: read aloud, incarcerated mothers, family literacy, bonding**

# Introduction

Reading aloud to children stretches their imagination, predicts their reading and academic success, improves their listening, comprehension and social-emotional skills, and nurtures a lifelong love of reading (Swick 2009; Zucker, Cabell, Justice, Pentimonti, & Kaderavek 2013; Baker and Scher 2002). Reading together promotes a strong, loving relationship and a secure emotional attachment. It provides a valuable platform for discussions, debate, and play (Demack and Stevens 2013; Bus 2001). Exposure to stories nurtures empathy, builds the capacity for wonder, and provides knowledge of a range of experiences that children can draw on to give them confidence as they encounter the world (Demack and Stephens 2013; Cunningham and Zilbulsky 2010; Blewitt, Rump, Shealy and Cook 2009). Each year, 25 000 Canadian children are denied the powerful experience and benefits of reading with their mothers; their mothers are in prison (Cunningham and Baker 2003; Feminist Alliance for International Action 2008). For many families, contact with their incarcerated mother is rare (Cunningham and Baker 2003; Feminist Alliance for International Action 2008).

Emerging research identifies the impact of separation on mothers and their children during maternal incarceration: disruption of the attachment bond, financial and food insecurity, physical and mental health problems, increased aggression, depression, and anxiety, and loneliness and isolation resulting from community stigma (Hairston 2007; Christian 2009; Allen, Flaherty, and Ely 2010). To mitigate these effects, myriad programs have been designed to enable imprisoned mothers to maintain and strengthen relationships with their children. One such program is the Mother-Child Read Aloud Program, run by the Elizabeth Fry Society of Saint John, NB, and offered to women federally incarcerated at the Nova Institution for Women located in Truro, Nova Scotia. Mothers are recorded reading aloud to their children and the recordings, together with the books, are sent back to their families.

This research explores the outcomes of the program, from the perspective of those who participated. It emerges from a concern about social injustice and disparity, the increasing number of criminalized women, the lack of attention to their voices, and the impact maternal incarceration has on their families and our communities. The research seeks to understand if and how shared reading can strengthen family relationships, build family literacy, and foster resilience.

# Theoretical Framework

Several key constructs serve as the theoretical underpinning of this research. Fundamentally, the research is informed by feminist theory which emphasize that knowledge is socially constructed and that experiences are contextualized and intersecting. It seeks to critique oppressive systems and amplify marginalized voices, in this case the voices of caregivers who are an under-researched and often ignored social group. The research also makes use of several closely connected sociological models: Relational Cultural Theory, Attachment Theory, Ecological Systems Models, and Family Resilience Theory. Relational Cultural Theory is an inclusive model that examines the contextual factors that facilitate or impede a person’s move toward connection and relationships (Miller 1986). Attachment Theory emphasizes the critical role of the parent-child or caregiver-child relationship for healthy development (Bowlby 1982). Ecological Systems Models explore how interdependent settings and systems shape a person’s secure attachments and healthy development (Bronfenbrenner 1979). Finally, Family Resilience Theory investigates the key processes that nurture a family’s capacity to adapt and grow through adversity (Ungar 2011; Masten and Cicchetti 2016).

# Research questions

1. a) What are mothers’ perspectives on the outcomes of the Mother-Child Read Aloud Program?

b) How, if at all, does participation in the program act as a protective factor and/or ameliorate risk factors in the lives of incarcerated women and their children?

1. What, if any, are the key elements of shared read-aloud programs that promote family connection, build family literacy skills, encourage love of reading, foster empowerment and positive identity, and facilitate family and community re-entry?

# Methodology

A qualitative case study approach was used for this research. Case studies are particularly appropriate when examining a relatively under-researched topic, and when wishing to probe deeply to gain a thorough understanding of a particular group or situation (Leedy & Ormrod, 2016; Elman, Gerring, and Mahoney 2016; Yin 2014). Case study was suitable for this research as it encourages the researcher to focus on understanding the how and why of a specific program or phenomenon (Yin 2014). The Mother-Child Read Aloud Program was chosen for this case study research because of proximity convenience, and based on the assumption that its characteristics, implementation, and outcomes are representative of other programs (Elman, Gerring, and Mahoney 2016). Research exploring the perceived outcomes of intervention programs for incarcerated women is still rare; a deep and detailed investigation of one program is therefore valuable.

Six semi-structured interviews were conducted with mothers who participated in the program, both those who remain at Nova and those who have returned to their communities. In addition, 94 letters sent by children and their children’s caregivers were reviewed. Qualitative content analysis was used to examine and extract meaning from the interview and letter transcripts.

# Research Results

Analysis of the interviews from former participants of the Mother-Child Read Aloud Program and of the letters written by their children and children’s caregivers reveal it was the process of participation, not the content of the books shared, that was so important to all involved. What mattered was the act itself, the commitment and capacity to read and share. This is evident throughout the six main themes identified: strengthened family bonds, literacy as hidden bonus, identity, a mother’s distal presence, opening space for relationships, and coping mechanism.

Participation in the Mother-Child Read Aloud Program helped incarcerated mothers bond and connect with their children in the simplest, most fundamental way – by reading them stories. Five of the women explicitly stated the program was the best opportunity women on the inside have to keep their families together. Improved literacy and increased love of reading was recognized as a “hidden bonus.” Several caregivers wrote that participation in the program inspired regular reading in their homes. Of the women who have returned to their communities, reading remains central in their families’ lives. Many of the women spoke about how participation in the program let them regain a sense of normalcy, and regain an identity associated with their role as a mother, rather than that of prisoner. Almost without exception, the letters were filled with references to how the recordings were listened to repeatedly and how they helped the children feel closer to their mothers. Participation in the Mother-Child Read Aloud Program made room for strengthened relationships beyond those between incarcerated mothers and their children. It sometimes eased or deepened bonds or interactions with caregivers and fellow inmates, as well as contributed to relationship-building in the wider community. Finally, all the women spoke about how the program gave them something to look forward to, something to calm and steady them in a challenging, often-chaotic environment. Four mentioned how the program helped them stay focused on their goals and to remember what they were working toward.

# Discussion

The research findings support the literature on relational cultural theory, attachment theory, ecological systems theory, and resilience science that underscore the importance of connection with others for the self-worth, positive identity, coping ability, and healthy development of incarcerated women and their children. In line with previous research, all the women in this study identified the most damaging part of being in prison was separation from, concern for the well-being of, and lack of contact with their children. For them, participation in the Mother-Child Read Aloud Program served as a tool for ameliorating the effects of this separation. This study suggests a shared reading program can have a profoundly positive impact on the lives of incarcerated women and their children, particularly if these programs recognize the centrality of women’s roles as mothers, are strengths-based, and adopt an ecological perspective.

# Conclusion

The Mother-Child Read Aloud Program helps incarcerated mothers bond with their children in the simplest, most fundamental way – by reading them stories. Incarcerated women are among society’s most marginalized members. For many of them, days are spent trying to live their lives as mothers within the grueling confines of poverty, abuse, addiction, and mental illness, in addition to their being criminalized and incarcerated. Most do not have access to sustained support for healthy physical, mental, and social development. Participation in a shared reading program like the Mother-Child Read Aloud Program lends them that support: meaningful contact and stronger relationships between incarcerated women and their families; improved sense of self-worth, focus, and positive identity for women; increased self-esteem and confidence for children; deeper interest in reading; and strengthened resilience.

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