Bonding through books behind bars: Reconnecting incarcerated mothers/grandmothers with children

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Bonding through books behind bars: Reconnecting incarcerated mothers/grandmothers with children

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ABSTRACT

Bonding through books is a pilot project that sought to engage incarcerated mothers/grandmothers through furthering their literacy skills to promote prosocial relationships with their children/grandchildren. Literacy measurements often consider fourth-grade reading to be a baseline for future achievement. Approximately 68% of children in the U.S. do not meet this standard with most youth coming from rural, low-income or at-risk homes—an almost exact match for incarcerated mothers and children in Kansas. We sought to help reduce prison disciplinary issues, ease the reintegration process, and increase success upon release. This was accomplished through both live (on-site) and recorded read aloud sessions and measured through pre/post-test data analysis and the review of disciplinary reports. Pre and post-test surveys included the Rhodes Secondary Reading Attitude Assessment, Parenting Sense of Competency Scale, and National Assessment of Adult Literacy. At the culmination of the project, the mothers/grandmothers would be assisted with recording themselves reading a children’s book to be sent home to their children/grandchildren. Due to unforeseen travel issues, post-test data is not available and all reported data is based on pre-test data. Most participants were already interested in reading and felt competent parenting behind bars.

INTRODUCTION & PRESENT STUDY

Inmates as Mothers:
• The rate of incarcerated women in prisons is on a steep upward inclined.
• Around 60%-62% of state prisons had minor children prior to incarceration (Glaze & Marschuk 2008; Hagan & Foster 2012; Huebner & Gustafson 2007) with over one-third being the mother of at least one minor child (Glaze & Marschuk, 2008).
• Incarcerated mothers report concerns about separation from their children and found retaining bonds is one of the most challenging aspects of doing time (Kazura, 2001). The longer one is incarcerated, the more difficult it becomes for mothers to maintain relationships with their children (Artidi, 2012).
• Positive social supports, such as communicating with one’s child, has been shown to reduce prison acting out, reintegrate, and reduce recidivism (Cochran & Mears, 2013).

Prison Reading Programs
• The National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) considers fourth-grade literacy as the measuring stick for future achievement.
• Up to 70% of U.S. inmates are functionally illiterate (Larig, 2012).
• An increase in motivation to read helps increase self-esteem in parenting and future reading with one’s child/grandchild (Morrison & Wlodarczyk, 2009).
• Research on prison reading programs for parents and children has been successful in maintaining parental relationships while reducing the negative impact of parental incarceration (Blumberg & Griffin, 2013).
• According to the Annex E. Casey Foundation, children of prison inmates are one of the most vulnerable groups of children struggling with functional literacy (2009).
• Incarcerated parents with literacy deficiencies have been linked to having children placed at high-risk for becoming less than proficient readers themselves (Blaze, 2010).

Current Study
• Approximately 68% of children in the U.S. do not meet proficiency standards with most coming from families, low-income and at-risk homes (Zoukas, 2016)—a description of most incarcerated women and their children in Kansas.
• Through a multidisciplinary collaboration between the Departments of Criminal Justice and Teacher Education, the study aimed to improve mother/grandmother’s literacy skills and confidence in parenting to improve bonds with their children/grandchildren.
• Participants (N=12) were selected from the Topeka Correctional Facility (TCF)—the only prison in the state with only female inmates.
• The current study sought to answer the following through pre/post-test data: 1) Will there be an increase in parenting competency after completion of the read aloud program? 2) Will there be an increase in motivation to read after completion of the read aloud program? 3) Will there be a reduction in the number of disciplinary infractions after completion of the read aloud program?

METHOD

Sample & Procedure
• Several criteria were used to recruit mothers/grandmothers at TCF: 1) Participants needed to be at, or below, a basic reading level; 2) participants needed legal rights to their children/grandchildren; and 3) participants needed to have at least six months of time to be served remaining.
• In total, ten mothers and two grandmothers (n=12) were recruited by facility staff.
• At the start of the Spring 2020 academic calendar, participants were given three pre-test surveys: 1) Rhodes Secondary Reading Attitude Assessment; 2) Parenting Sense of Competency Scale; and 3) the National Assessment of Adult Literacy: Prison Background Questionnaire.
• Participants were given copies of a young adult chapter book as well as a child’s book.
• Throughout the semester, teacher education students recorded two ten-minute read aloud sessions, per week, to be provided to the participants (most aligning with the provided books).
• At the culmination of the semester, participants were to, again, complete the three surveys to serve as post-test data and be assisted with recording themselves reading the selected children’s book to be sent home to their children/grandchildren.

RESULTS & FIGURE

• Results include only information provided in the pre-test data collection.

Discussion
• Mothers/grandmothers may feel embarrassment and shame while struggling to read.
• This project aimed to help improve motivation to read by improving literacy skills, and subsequently, increasing competence to parent their children/grandchildren.
• Preliminary results suggest the participants already had a strong interest in reading and use it as a form of coping.
• Mothers and grandmothers already feel prepared and competent in their parenting.

Limitations
• Due to COVID-19, 19 post-test data, review of disciplinary reports, and the recording of books had to be postponed.
• Each participant already completed parenting classes—biasing the data on parenting.
• The racial breakdown of the participants was limited to those identifying as White or Black (unrepresentative of other races).
• The project was partially intended to help women reintegrate into society, but some women were incarcerated for life sentences.

REFERENCES