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## **PORTRAIT OF THE INCARCERATED WOMAN AS A READING MOTHER: REVEALING THE PERCEIVED IMPACT OF A SHARED READING PROGRAM (Paper)**

### **Abstract:**

Reading aloud to children stretches their imagination, deepens their understanding of their world and those of others, enriches their vocabulary, supports their emerging literacy and communication skills, and nurtures a lifelong love of reading (Swick, 2009; Zucker, Cabell, Justice, Pentimonti, & Kaderavek, 2013; Baker & Scher, 2002). Caregivers gain increased confidence, enjoy improved parent-child engagement and interaction, and establish a deeper interest in the child's life (Demack & Stevens, 2013). Reading together as a family strengthens emotional attachment and offers an opportunity to share perspectives, interests, and values (Bus, 2001). The threads of shared stories between caregiver and child are woven tightly to reinforce a foundation of literacy and connection. Each year, 25 000 Canadian children experience the unraveling of those threads; their mothers are in prison (Cunningham & 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, & Ely, 2010). In an attempt to ameliorate these effects, myriad programs have been designed to enable imprisoned mothers to maintain and strengthen relationships with their children. Shared reading programs are among them. Mothers are recorded reading aloud to their children and the recordings, together with the books, are sent back to their families (Finlay, 2015). Underpinning these programs is the belief that mothers gain a sense of responsibility and a meaningful opportunity to play a significant role in their children's lives (Loring, 2012; Muth, 2006). Mothers are able to extend the thread of shared stories beyond the prison wall.

My thesis explores the value and impact of one of those programs from the perspective of former participants. This research is based on a case study of the Mother-Child Read Aloud program offered by the Elizabeth Fry Society, Saint John, at Nova Institute for Women in Truro, Nova Scotia. Up to eight former participants of the program will be interviewed -- women who remain at Nova as well as those who have returned to their communities. Additionally, I will review the letters the Elizabeth Fry Society has received from families of women who have participated in the Mother-Child Read Aloud program. Thematic analysis methods will be applied to the letters and interview transcripts to determine what elements of the programs, if any, strengthen family relationships, build family literacy, foster empowerment, and ease reunification and re-entry into their communities.

The Canadian Association for Information Science 2017 conference theme, “The Warp & Weft of Knowledge: Information Threads Connecting Disciplines, Identities and Perspectives,” celebrates woven threads. It encourages us to explore how our field of information science – like information itself - spans disciplinary boundaries, connects multiple and varying identities, illuminates different perspectives, and inspires innovative ideas. I welcome the opportunity to share with conference participants the preliminary findings of my research that centres the experiences and perspectives of those traditionally excluded, and urges academics, practitioners, and policy-makers to co-construct information and knowledge that informs more meaningful policies, programs, and services.

This research emerges from a concern about the increasing numbers of criminalized women, the silencing of their voices, and the dearth of research exploring the information needs and perceptions of incarcerated women as they relate to their role as mothers. The rate of women incarcerated in Canada continues to steadily rise, although crime rates continue to fall, and multiple reports and national inquiries have concluded that “prison is rarely a necessary, appropriate or proportionate response to women who get caught up in the criminal justice system” (Prison Reform Trust, 2015; Statistics Canada, 2016). Between 2005 and 2015, the number of federally sentenced women increased 50% (compared to an increase of less than 10% for men). More than 70% of these women have children under the age of eighteen (Sapers, 2015). Limited studies indicate that mothers report feelings of despair, anxiety, anger, shame, guilt, decreased

self-esteem, a sense of loss, and an identity that becomes associated with the role of prisoner rather than woman or mother (Young & Smith, 2000; Allen, Flaherty, & Ely, 2010; Arditti, 2014). Programs that bolster a sense of agency and strengthen the relationships between incarcerated mothers and their children have been shown to serve as protective factors, mediating the impact of maternal incarceration (Arditti, 2014). This research will determine whether former participants of a Mother-Child Read Aloud program perceive involvement to have served as a protective factor, and if so, how.

Two summers ago, Lauri Arrington, a former participant in the Women's Storybook Project of Texas described her experience in *The New York Times'* Motherlode:

What I remember most was an unshakable joy of knowing that as long as I was reading that book, I was Mom again. It was surreal knowing my daughter would receive and hold in her hands the very same book that I held in my hands that day. We would occupy the same space even if it was at different times. (Arrington, 2015)

Each year, thousands of Canadian mothers' voices are silenced by too many kilometres, expensive phone-call fees, and prison walls. Projects like The Women's Storybook Project and Mother-Child Read Aloud seek to give those mothers their voices back through recordings of them reading to their children. This research will amplify those voices as they reveal the impact that participation in the Read Aloud program has on the lives of incarcerated mothers and their families.

Thus far I have spoken with four former participants of the Mother-Child Read Aloud program. They all echo Lauri Arrington's sentiments about relishing the opportunity to do something 'normal', as a mother: read aloud to their children and provide them with beautiful new books. Maintaining or strengthening a bond with their children is consistently ranked as the single most important outcome of the program. Literacy and love for reading are viewed as 'hidden bonuses'. Women with older children said the books were the focal point of their weekly phone conversations with their kids. Three of the women said that the program helped them maintain a steady, calm focus while inside the prison. Upon hearing that the program had lost its funding, one woman

began crying. She feared that the loss of the program, and with it a diminished contact with families, would contribute to more suicides.

An initial analysis of the letters sent to Elizabeth Fry by children and caregivers reveal unabashed gratitude for the program. One seven-year old declared, “I think it’s the best idea ever thought of.” Children read the books and listen to the tapes repeatedly, especially at bedtime. One caregiver wrote that receiving the books and the recordings allows the children to know that their mother is okay and still thinking of them.

Several key components of the program were identified by the women with whom I have spoken. The prison environment is noisy; phone calls and visits are often disrupted. Being able to go in to a silent room and make a quiet recording, reading just as if it was bedtime at home, is valued. Having new books, as opposed to ‘discards’ was highly appreciated by all. Three of the women asserted that it is important that the program is run by Elizabeth Fry. They expressed concern that programs or initiatives offered by Correctional Services Canada staff often get dropped inexplicably. All the women wished the Read Aloud program was run more frequently and suggested that an added video or phone-call component would reinforce literacy benefits, enabling more direct and immediate conversation and connection about the text.

Due to its Canadian perspective and specific focus on the narratives of incarcerated women, this study will be of interest to researchers in library and information science, education, and social work. The insights gained from this research will assist community and prison-based practitioners in determining how to create meaningful programs that produce positive outcomes for incarcerated women, their families, and our communities.

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