

The Impact of Parenting Classes on Incarcerated Mothers

KIMBERLY PHILLIPS

Northeastern State University, USA

KYONG-AH KWON

University of Oklahoma, USA

Abstract: *With growing public attention to the problem of mass incarceration, many individuals want to know about the vast rise in women's incarceration rates; particularly concerning, the increase of mothers in prison. For many mothers, the only source of hope and motivation they have while involved in the criminal justice system is the connection with their children. This article demonstrates that educational programs focusing on parenting can help incarcerated mothers renew their parental role upon release from prison. The target audience for this article includes, but is not limited to, correctional facility administrators, family counselors, educators, and anyone with an interest in parenting after prison. This article can also serve as a platform to advocate for quality parenting classes for incarcerated mothers.*

Keywords: *Incarceration, parenting class, mothers*

One of the most shocking calamities that has been witnessed in the United States is the escalation in mass incarceration and the damaging effects families feel for generations to come (Haskins, 2016). Women's incarceration has exploded at a 700% increase in the last two decades (Kaistura, 2019). Most of these women are mothers and are more likely to have custody of their children prior to incarceration, compared to men (Dillion, 2018). This rapid increase in maternal incarceration makes important implications for their role as a parent and their children and family who are left behind.

Incarcerated women, specifically mothers, face countless hardships while in prison. The incarcerated mothers are at risk of losing their children, and they often do during their incarceration (Wildeman, Goldman, & Turney, 2018). They struggle due to lack of contact and communication with family, feelings of isolation, and guilt (Aiello & McQueeney, 2016) as many of their children reside with their grandparents or go into the foster care system (Kids Count, 2016). In addition, the incarcerated mother often portrays herself as inadequate and incompetent who lacks knowledge and parenting skills and is unable to provide for the needs of her children (Coll et al., 1998). This feeling of incompetence as a mother may be, in part, due to the absence of a positive role model and support for parenting when growing up. Even after release, the previously incarcerated mothers continue to encounter various obstacles to effectively function as a parent (Easterling, 2012). For example, their low educational levels and criminal records serve as a major barrier in finding employment, which leads to hardships in caring for their children (Haskins, 2016; Women in Prison Project, 2006).

Accordingly, to be better prepared for life and a resumed parenting role after prison, the



mothers need appropriate education and training (Garcia, 2016). Many correctional facilities provide some type of job training programs and general education degree (GED) classes to help these mothers prepare for their life after prison. These programs sometimes include parenting classes in an attempt to help alleviate these mothers' stress and improve their parenting skills (Garcia, 2016). However, there are limited studies available that look at both immediate and long-term impacts of programs on mothers in and after prison through in-depth inquiries of their perspectives. Thus, the purpose of this case study is to provide a detailed description of the incarcerated mothers' experiences with the parenting class and what impact the class has on them in prison and after their release.

Separation Struggles of Incarcerated Mothers

Mothers in the criminal justice system must leave their children behind with their family or in foster care systems (Easterling, 2012). Being separated and concerned about the well-being of their children are considered the most damaging aspects of living in prison for women (Wildeman, Goldman, Turney, 2018). The research found that separation from children is generally a greater hardship for women than for men as women are traditionally and often assumed to play a role of the primary caregivers (Mumola, 2010). For many incarcerated mothers, their relationship, or lack thereof, with their children can have a profound effect on how they function in prison (Aiello & McQueeney, 2016). Negativism, manipulation, rule-breaking, and fighting between incarcerated women are signs of "resistance for survival" in response to the grief, loss, shame, and guilt they feel about their role as a mother (Coll et al., 1998).

This struggle with separation is often exacerbated by a lack of contact with their children while their mothers are in prison (Kabel & Cowhig, 2018). According to the Bureau of Justice Statistics (2018), fifty-four percent of mothers in state prisons report receiving no personal visits with their children since their admission. Geographical distance to the prison, lack of transportation, and an unwillingness or an inability of the current caregiver to bring a child to a correctional facility are the major reasons for a lack of visits. In some cases, the forced separation between mother and child with minimal contact results in the permanent termination of the parent-child relationship (Aiello & McQueeney, 2016).

Research shows that preserving a child's relationship with their incarcerated mother benefits both the mother and the child (Poehlmann, 2005). Meeting with and staying connected to a child can bring comfort and pleasure, and knowing the child is doing well can dispel uncertainty and lessen the guilt for the mother (Poehlmann, Schlafer, Maes, & Hanneman, 2008). Regular visits and communication may also serve as a reminder to the mother to work toward reuniting with her child through self-improvement opportunities. For many women, the only source of hope and motivation they have while incarcerated is the connection with their children (Mumola, 2010). Parental incarceration is not an isolated occurrence. It is a process that unfolds over time even after release. These incarcerated mothers will benefit from support and resources that assist them in preserving their relationships and connections with their children and family.

Opportunities in Prison: Supporting Mothers to Regain Competence in Parenting

The majority of correctional facilities allow faith-based and community-based programs to fill a void and help incarcerated mothers maintain connections and relationships with their children. Some examples include recorded book readings from the parent to the child, Christmas gifts given to the children on behalf of the mothers, and play dates arranged for when children are on breaks from school (Sharp, 2003). These opportunities help maintain and encourage the strong parent-child bond, but do not address preparing the mothers to parent after prison.

Other programs at some correctional facilities are offered to help incarcerated mothers develop parenting skills and positive attitudes toward parenting (Loper & Tuerk, 2011; Wilson

et al., 2010). They were designed for mothers with children ranging in ages from infants to eighteen years of age (Lovell, et al, 2020). The programs range from two to ninety hours of instruction. The content these classes cover include anger management, communication, child development, nurturing children through reading and play, non-violent discipline techniques, adult development, transition planning, and co-parenting (Armstrong et al., 2017; Correctional Education Association, 2016; Loper & Tuerk, 2011; Lovell et al, 2020; Newman et al., 2011; Tremblay & Sutherland, 2017). A variety of teaching modalities and delivery methods are utilized such as lectures, small group discussions, role play, handouts, and videos (Loper & Tuerk, 2011; Wildeman, Goldman, & Turney, 2018; Wilson et al., 2010).

However, the quality and the rigor of the curriculum vary greatly, and the intensity and lengths of the classes are often minimal (e.g., two to three brief sessions, Armstrong et al., 2017; Loper & Tuerk, 2011; Lovell et al, 2020). Qualifications of the facilitators differ from student interns to highly trained instructors (Correctional Education Association, 2016). It is uncommon that these courses are taught by a qualified instructor who has a strong background and expertise in child development and early childhood education (Correctional Education Association, 2016).

There are a number of studies investigating the impact of parenting programs conducted in prisons targeting mothers (Armstrong et al., 2017; Loper & Tuerk, 2011; Newman et al., 2011; Tremblay & Sutherland, 2017; Troy et al., 2018; Wilson et al., 2010). These studies were all conducted since 2010 and the majority used a quantitative research method (i.e., survey). The utilization of pre- and post-assessments was the most common form of data collection for analysis. Several positive impacts of the parenting class reported from these studies include improvements in parenting attitude (Tremblay & Sutherland, 2017), parenting skills (Armstrong et al., 2017; Newman et al., 2011), parenting knowledge, parent-child relationships (Armstrong et al., 2017; Tremblay & Sutherland, 2017), and parenting behavior (Tremblay & Sutherland, 2017).

There are a few exemplar programs and evaluation studies. For example, a parenting class, Parenting Inside Out, focused on cognitive behavioral therapy to reduce emotional reactivity to stressful situations (Loper & Tuerk, 2011). Group discussions and video vignettes were part of the main delivery method. The class was facilitated by clinical psychology doctoral students and met for a total of 18 hours across five sessions. This class promotes strategies that allow mothers to maintain their parental identity despite their crimes, incarceration, and separation from their children. As a result of this class, visitation stress was reduced as well as levels of parenting stress. Another program (Miller et al., 2014), Parenting While Incarcerated, is similar to Parenting Inside Out in the content, intensity, delivery methods, and target outcomes. Parenting, addiction, communication, relationships, self-esteem, emotions, and budgeting were the core curriculum concepts. Results include the improvement of the parent-child relationship, a higher level of self-esteem for the mothers, and an increase of contact with their children (Miller et al., 2014).

To address the urgent needs of mothers trying to parent in prison, high-quality parenting classes are essential. They need a sufficient number of sessions, a qualified expert as an instructor, and rigorous studies that examine the impact of these classes. However, with a few exceptions, the extant classes are somewhat limited and lacking because of the unavailability of highly qualified instructors, short course duration, and the lack of rigor in course content. There is a need for high-quality parenting programs to help incarcerated mothers transition to life after prison and improve their parenting.

Description of Parenting Class for the Present Study

The parenting class described in the study has many elements of high-quality programming that are also tailored for this unique group of mothers. This class is a three-hour credit-bearing college course offered to a group of twenty-five mothers. It met for sixteen weeks,

three hours per week. The course is designed to explore parenting philosophies, styles, and techniques as well as decisions, responsibilities, and issues related to parent-child relationships. The author of the present study served as an instructor of the course and taught the same group in three other classes. She holds a master's degree in early childhood education and has taught various child development and early childhood education classes in higher education for thirteen years. These mothers stay with the same group over multiple courses as a cohort.

There were several key features and strategies used for this class. Modeling was frequently used through live or recorded demonstrations of parenting behaviors since the mothers may have lacked a positive maternal role model. Roleplay allowed the mothers to practice skills in a safe environment since many had little or no contact with their children during this time. The course consisted of a balance of lecturing and hands-on assignments, including peer discussions, small group collaboration, video viewing, and whole-group activities. Homework was essential to allow the mothers time away from class to reflect, work through the textbook, and complete required readings. Weekly reflections of learned material were a class requirement, which also served as an assessment to assist the instructor on how the content was received.

The Present Study

In response to the rising number of incarcerated mothers, more parenting classes, support programs, and studies on the impact of these programs became available. However, the current literature on this topic has a few important limitations. First, as mentioned above, there is a lack of high-quality parenting classes available for this population or studies showing their impact. Second, many of the existing studies examined the program effectiveness, using a pre- and post-assessment design, but they collected data mostly through a questionnaire with a predetermined set of targeted outcomes. Third, most previous studies investigated the immediate impact of the class and rarely explored its long-term impact on their actual parenting after prison. There are also limited studies available that use a case study paradigm to capture the rich stories of the incarcerated mothers' experiences with the parenting class and its impact on them and their parenting.

This case study was designed to examine the incarcerated mothers' experiences with a high-quality parenting class and its impact on them in and after prison from a variety of data sources. The intent of the present study is to allow the voices and perspectives of this sensitive and silenced population to be heard, which would rarely be captured in a survey study. It presents a realistic and contextually rich situation that provides the researcher a glimpse into the topic of parenting in prison, and after prison. The research questions include: (a) what experiences did the incarcerated mothers have from the parenting class they attended in prison? and (b) what impact does the parenting class have on the incarcerated mothers in prison and after release from prison?

Method

This study used a case study method for the in-depth inquiry on how recently released mothers feel about their current parenting practices in regard to taking a parenting course while incarcerated. This method permits the researcher to answer "how" and "why" type questions, while taking into consideration how a phenomenon is influenced by the context within which it is situated (Baxter & Jack, 2008). A case study will give allowance for research inquiry that examines a real-life contemporary phenomenon, in this case parenting after prison, by exploring situations that have no clear set of outcomes (Yin, 2009). This research approach allows the researcher to view and interpret the incarcerated mothers' experiences with the parenting class from a variety of sources (Tellis, 1997). Individual interviews with the mothers, artifacts (e.g., self-reflection, class discussion assignment), questionnaires, and parent logs were collected over time were used to gain the data needed for this research study.

Participants and Settings

Utilizing convenience sampling, twelve mothers who were previously incarcerated were invited to the study, all of whom were willing to participate. These mothers were former students of the researcher while they were incarcerated and were contacted for research after they release from prison. Among them, six mothers met the following criteria the researcher established for this study (see Figure 1). The criteria for inclusion encompassed the following specifications: (a) recently released from prison, and (b) took a parenting class with the researcher while incarcerated.

The participants spent an average of six years incarcerated and separated from their children. All the mothers were convicted of a drug-related crime. The majority of the mothers reported they were raised by a single parent, raised in poverty, and their highest education level was a high school diploma or equivalent. They had been released from prison within the last two years, ranging from six to fifteen months, which provided a window of time to capture the reunification process between mother and child. Half of the participants identified as White, and half identified as Native Americans. The average age of these mothers is 35 and their age ranged from 32 to 42 years with the majority of the participants having three children, ranging in age from 7 to 25 years of age. The participants have chosen their own pseudonyms for this study. Both Amy and Journee have two children. Bambi, Chevelle, Denise, and Dona have three children each.

Figure 1. *Demographic Information on Participants*

Name (pseudonym)	Race/Ethnicity	Mothers Age	Number of Children	Ages of children	Mother's Years Spent in Prison
Amy	Caucasian/White	34	2	8, 10	5
Bambi	Native American	33	3	8, 11, 13	4
Chevelle	Caucasian/White	32	3	8,10, 11	6
Denise	Native American	36	3	3, 11, 17	7
Dona	Caucasian/White	42	3	20,22,25	10
Journee	Native American	34	2	8, 16	6

Amy. Amy was convicted of a drug-related crime when she was 24 years old. She was arrested with her boyfriend and they both were sentenced to ten years. Both of her young sons, ages five and seven, were with her at the time of the arrest and placed into state custody until Amy's mother could care for the children.

Bambi. Bambi struggled being a single parent with three children under the age of six and turned to drugs to help her cope with the personal stressors in life. Bambi spent six years in prison without seeing her children.

Chevelle. Chevelle did not graduate from high school and was the self-described life of the party before her arrest in 2010. She reported that drugs were her downfall. She had three young sons, but does not remember much about their upbringing.

Denise. Denise was a single mother of three and served time for drugs and arson, spending five years away from her children.

Dona. Dona was a single mother of three young children when she began selling drugs to make ends meet. Dona began her first sentence and passed through three facilities in three years before being released on probation. Within a year, she was back in prison, serving a six-year sentence for violating her parole.

Journee. Journee was first arrest of drug possession at the age of eighteen. Journee had two children by the time she was 20 and was convicted at age 22 for a fifteen-year sentence for drugs.

Data Collection and Procedures

As part of the Institutional Review Board (IRB) process, the researcher personally contacted the mothers who fit the criteria by email. A consent form was given to each of the six qualified mothers who were interested in participating in the study. Four major data sources collected from the participants for the case study consist of a questionnaire on participants' demographic and background information, weekly self-reflection assignments, individual interviews, and parent logs, which are described below in detail.

Demographic and background information was obtained through a Qualtrics questionnaire administered before the initial interview. Each participant completed the questionnaire using a link sent to them via email. Weekly self-reflections were completed after class instruction and submitted to the instructor at the end of the course. The self-reflections were prompted by the content covered in class that night. For example, one class session covered future goals. The prompt asked the mothers what their hopes and dreams were for their children. The logic behind the self-reflections was two-fold; extend the participants' thought processes to revolve around after prison expectations and to serve as an assessment for the instructor to ensure content was delivered in the intended way so that the mothers were able to make a meaningful connection.

The purpose of the interview was to collect information from participants to understand the impact the parenting course made while parenting after prison. This is a topic that cannot be directly observed but where interviews are an appropriate method of data collection (Yin, 2006, 2009, and 2011). The participants were interviewed twice, each interview ranging from one to two hours in length and were conducted two to four weeks apart. The two interviews allowed the researcher to gain useful insight from the first interview to then form questions that complemented the participant's answers during the second interview. The initial interview utilized a set of questions predetermined by the researcher.

The majority of the questions for the second interview were formed from the initial interview responses as a follow-up. Each interview location was determined by the participant's current residency. The interviews took place in local restaurants or coffee shops, close to each participant's home or place of employment, and where the participant felt most comfortable. The researcher ensured the interviews were conducted in low traffic areas and kept as private and confidential as possible. The semi-structured interviews were audio-recorded to ensure that the participant's stories were not construed by possible errors. The majority of interview questions related to participants experiences with the parenting class, what they learned through the parenting course, and the possible impacts the course had on their parenting practices in and after prison. The interviews were transcribed and analyzed for developing codes, categories, and themes.

The mothers were also asked to keep a parent log for three weeks in which they documented personal reflections on their experiences as a parent and their children's responses. They were asked to respond to the log at least two days every week. All participants returned the completed logs, with the majority completing at least four entries. The researcher provided

the parenting log notebooks and writing prompts with open-ended questions to each of the participants. The writing prompts included: (a) a parenting method they use to help them bond with their child, and (b) an open-ended prompt where the mother can discuss what is on their mind regarding their children and/or their parenting.

Data Analysis

This study used a variety of techniques for data collection to provide rich description and detail (Merriam, 2009) that is suitable for a case study. Data from the in-depth interviews, questionnaire responses, self-reflections, and parent logs were transcribed verbatim and entered in a password-protected spreadsheet. This helped with sorting and organizing the vast amount of information that was obtained from the participants. Keeping the research question in mind, level one analysis utilized open coding for each of the interview questions (Miles & Huberman, 1994; Patton, 2002). Level two analysis included re-examining and collapsing codes. This process allowed the researcher to identify emerging categories and themes. Level three analysis examined all the themes to make sense of the data and ensure that it reflected the story being told. The three-step analysis was followed on the additional three forms of data.

Using multiple sources allowed for cross-verification, helping to make meaning while triangulating the data (Bazeley, 2013). Triangulation of interviews, questionnaires, self-reflection, and the mother's log occurred during the data analysis process. Triangulating the data minimized any bias that could have transpired within the conclusions or findings. Data was compared to see if the inferences drawn from one type of data were comparable with those obtained in other types of data (Bazeley, 2013). Triangulation also occurred by connecting the research back to the existing body of literature (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Since the researcher was formerly the participants' instructor, it is important to safeguard the ethics throughout the study (Patton, 2002). A relationship was established between the mothers and the researcher while the researcher was their instructor for the parenting class. This relationship helped the participants feel comfortable to share their experiences. However, there was concern about the potential bias that would influence the researcher's view of the participants' experiences based on her former relationships with them. She was fully aware of this potential bias and tried to be careful when interviewing and interpreting the results. She also carefully gathered the data from multiple sources to minimize the bias and assure the accuracy of the findings. In addition, to obtain a more objective and balanced view, the researcher participated in peer debriefing meetings throughout the study and discussed a data analysis process in detail with fellow doctoral students and faculty who have expertise in qualitative research methods.

Findings and Discussion

The present study examined incarcerated mothers' experiences with a high-quality parenting class and how the course impacted them as people and parents. This study contributes to the field by examining the immediate and long-term impacts the parenting class had on the incarcerated mothers in and after prison. The case study utilized a variety of data sources such as self-reflections, interviews, and parent logs to capture the voice and perspectives of this sensitive and silenced group of incarcerated mothers. In general, the incarcerated mothers who participated in this study had a positive experience with the parenting class and it proved to be impactful, not only with their parenting, but also, with personal growth even after prison. Through a series of data analysis, patterns and themes between the data sources were identified. Five major themes emerged from the analysis: (1) rebuilding relationships with family through self-reflection, (2) healing and therapeutic process, (3) developing a useful toolkit for parenting, (4) confidence as a parent, and (5) continuing challenges and needs for more supports. The

results from each of the five themes are described in detail below (see Figure 2).

Figure 2. Overarching Themes

Overarching Theme	Categories	Description
Rebuilding Relationships with Family through Self-reflection	Difficulty facing the past Recognized the importance of self-reflection Parent-child relationship	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Learned past parental influences were not always positive or healthy • Newly formed understanding and appreciation for their own mothers • Improved relationships with children
Healing and Therapeutic Process	Safe environment for sharing Acknowledging past failures and moving forward Formed new friendships and support from classmates that continue outside of the yard Knowing you are not alone and shared same struggles and concerns as peers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Personal healing from past experiences gave mothers hope • Instructor created a non-judgmental classroom setting • Felt understood and valued by peers • Extended peer network and support after prison • A sense of belonging and camaraderie by sharing similar experiences with peers
Developing Useful Toolkit for Parenting	Clearer expectations for age-appropriate behavior Improved lines of communication Better understanding of children's feelings and actions Do not take things for granted as a mother	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Participants gained valuable knowledge related to the basics of child development (including developmentally appropriate but realistic expectations for child) • Improved relationships with children through communication with the help scenarios for role playing • Improved parenting skills (including flexible and positive behavior guidance techniques)
Confidence as a Parent	New view of self and why it is important to care for oneself Changes in parental attitude	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Enhanced sense of empowerment and confidence to not take things for granted • Learned importance of self-care • Motivated to re-learn how to be a good parent
Continuing Challenges and Needs for Supports	Transitioning from Prisoner to Parent Lack of supports	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Life after prison is more challenging than expected • Needs for continued mentoring and support for their parenting role • Needs for other types of support

Rebuilding Relationships with Family through Self-Reflection

All the mothers who participated in the study reflected on their own experiences of being parented, realizing the significant influences of the past on their approach to parenting and the challenge of breaking this intergenerational cycle. They mentioned that in the beginning, it was not easy for them to look back on their own issues and their experiences in early childhood or before incarceration. It was often very negative and painful to recall. The majority were raised by a single parent, lived in an impoverished household, felt neglected, experienced substance abuse, and had strained relationships with their parents and siblings. None of them had an adult figure as a role model for parenting. Chevelle stated how difficult and distressing this process was in one of her journal entries:

It was hard at the beginning because I was forced to remember what happened when I was a child. I had to resolve some of my own issues and that is hard for people to do. So, I was able to learn to get over my childhood, so I'm not reliving my childhood through my kids.

The course offered opportunities through self-reflection and class discussions for the mothers to reflect on their relationships with family members, especially a mother, and their childhood memories. Through multiple class sessions with these opportunities, the participants realized how important it is to reflect on the adversity they experience and the mistakes they have made. They learned that without in-depth reflection and efforts to overcome these struggles, they cannot move on and rebuild their life. They began to make efforts to repair their previously broken relationships with their family. When mothers can maintain or create contacts with people “outside the yard” it can help them stay connected to goals and opportunities beyond their prison sentence.

In particular, all the participants realized the important role their own mother played since they had been incarcerated. This led to a dramatic change in their view and relationships with their mother. Each participant revealed during the initial interview that they did not have a strong bond with their mother in the past and felt the absence of a mother figure in their childhood. However, during their incarceration their mothers became the primary caregiver for their children, arranged a place for them to stay once released (i.e., five out of six moved in with their mother), and provided financial support until they began working. The reflection and discussion in class provided an opportunity to reinforce their recognition and appreciation of their mother.

All six of the mothers commonly reported an improved relationship with their children as an outcome of taking the parenting class and going through in-depth self-reflections on their parenting role. The mothers stated that they improved relationships and communication with their child, which included their ability to empathize with their child, show affection, and provide encouragement and praise. These findings of the impact of the parenting class on positive relationships with their children and families are similar to the findings of the previous studies (Armstrong et al., 2017; Miller et al, 2014; Tremblay & Sutherland, 2017). The previous studies targeted building positive relationships with children as a key outcome of the class and found improvement in this area as a result of incarcerated mothers taking a parenting course. The present study added to the literature by discovering the impact of the parenting class not only on rebuilding relationships with their children but also repairing past strained relationships with their family, especially their mothers through self-reflection.

Therapeutic and Healing Process: Understanding and Feeling Understood

The majority of participating mothers mentioned that the parenting class they took was more than a class. It appeared to serve as a therapeutic and healing process through

finding self-compassion and acceptance. The prison environment is cold and harsh. It is not usually a place that welcomes vulnerability or values the sharing of feelings. Thus, many of the mothers were hesitant to open-up emotionally and embrace the opportunity to disclose their vulnerability by sharing their most personal thoughts and feelings, especially about their past where their children were concerned.

However, the positive attitudes of the course instructor and connections to their peers seemed to make a difference. The instructor's supportive and non-judgmental approach was the most frequently cited reason why this process was perceived as feeling therapeutic and healing. Amy noted, "She doesn't have one accusing bone in her body, and she builds up your confidence". The instructor provided clear guidance to manage and express their emotional struggles within the groups and facilitated trust and relationships between the mothers. Two of the participating mothers valued the instructor's ability to serve as a positive role model, emphasize their maternal role, and instill hope by being open, understanding, and accepting of them as who they are. Dona expressed her appreciation of the instructor understanding their situation and put it as the following:

You couldn't ask for a better instructor or class. Mrs. Kim is a mother herself. How can you tell somebody how it feels to be a mother if you're not a mother? You have to be a mother to understand what it feels like that we can't be with our kids.

Four of the mothers also reported the value of sharing experiences with the other mothers and being provided with an outlet to vent in a safe environment. They perceived it as helpful to have a place to vent about their challenges with children and found solace that others were going through similar struggles as incarcerated mothers. These mothers felt understood and reassured, normalized the difficulties they were experiencing, and realized all mothers make mistakes and were afforded an opportunity to learn from other incarcerated mothers. This experience and newly gained perspective not only brought much comfort and self-acceptance but also served as an opportunity to build mutual reliance and a strong sense of community. Journee mentioned, "You felt like you were not alone. We shared stories about our kids. We learned a lot from each other." Further, half of the participants reported that they were able to reconnect with their peers after release. They learned that they lived close enough to stay in close contact, meet up regularly, and develop connections and friendships extended from the parenting class. This close tie with peers who share similar challenges and interests was particularly helpful during the transition to the after-prison life where they usually lose all connections to their former friends and feel isolated. Having an established peer support system became an invaluable asset and comfort for these mothers.

These findings are somewhat consistent with those of Loper and Tuerk, (2011) who reported improvement in incarcerated women's relationships and reduced levels of stress by sharing and contributing to class. Bell and Cornwell (2015) also reported mothers having significant improvements in self-esteem, reduced levels of stress, and increased forgiveness. The findings of the present study (e.g., the significance of peer support, a non-judgmental and supportive environment) were not targeted outcomes of this parenting class, which is also the case in most of the previous parenting classes. Thus, it would not be able to be captured through a survey study with a clear set of targeted outcomes. The present study with the case study method added novel information to the current literature.

Developing Useful Toolkit for Parenting: Relevant Content with Flexible Strategies

All mothers who participated in the parenting class reported that they learned a great deal about how to be a good parent, including knowledge about child development and a variety of parenting techniques and guidance strategies, which became a helpful toolkit to use

with their children. The majority of the participants commented that the content in the class was helpful to understand child development and improve their parenting skills. They also noted they have a deeper understanding of their children's behaviors and needs and age-appropriate expectations for their children.

Five out of six of the participants shared they particularly valued the delivery approach of the parenting class that was collaborative and non-directive. Strategies introduced were flexible and adaptable to meet the specific needs of parents attending the course. The instructor discovered early on that the traditional course needed to be tailored for this specific group of mothers. For example, the importance of holding flexible and realistic expectations for changing old ways of thinking about what a parent should be was emphasized in class, which was perceived as helpful.

The way in which the mothers made the lessons learned from the parenting course work for them varied significantly. Some described the continued use of course resources, whereas for others, there was a process of adapting taught material to make it suitable for them and their children. Regardless, the majority of the participants agreed that the content on behavioral guidance and role play as a delivery method were particularly helpful in understanding and improving their parenting role. Two mothers mentioned that it was most helpful to learn the content about behavioral guidance. They emphasized learning the difference between punishment and discipline to manage their children's undesirable behavior, and the importance of listening to their child. Regarding the effective delivery method, three mothers perceived the role play as beneficial in facilitating them not only to understand others' perspectives but also to practice essential parenting skills in a safe environment. They gained knowledge from their instructor and peer modeling on how to react to certain situations through the role play activities.

There are a number of studies with similar findings that used role play as a strategy to help the mothers negotiate parenting skills and understand the need for positive guidance techniques (Armstrong et al., 2017; Loper & Tuerk, 2011; Newman et al., 2011; Tremblay & Sutherland, 2017; Troy et al., 2018; Wilson et al., 2010). Kennon et al. (2009)'s study offered related results that incarcerated mothers appeared to be motivated to gain an understanding of what children need after attending parenting classes. Mothers in a study conducted by Collica-Cox & Furst (2019) conveyed that they might change the way they discipline their children because of what they learned by taking a parenting class while incarcerated.

Confidence as a Parent

Parenting classes highlighted incarcerated mothers' need to confront their wrongdoings and the pain they had inevitably caused their children. Three of the mothers stated that taking this class resulted in an increase in self-awareness, empowerment, and regaining confidence in their ability as a parent. Reclaiming their roles as mothers offered confidence in their newfound knowledge of parenting. The parenting class provided various opportunities to reflect on and redefine self-identity as a parent through positive feedback and encouragement, which may have helped them build a sense of self-worth and higher self-esteem. The encouragement and support from peers also contributed to personal growth for the incarcerated mother. In this process, three of the mothers also recognized a critical need for self-care to sustain the positive outlook and motivation to be a good parent. Bambi wrote in her journal,

I think my biggest hurdle has been looking at my kids and being able to say I'm okay. I may not be perfect, but I am okay. I think that for me that was the biggest hurdle. Just to get over the fact that I am not a bad mother.

Morash & Schram (2002) remind us of what these mothers often face when trying to reinvent their mothering roles after incarceration. Having a new sense of purpose and being responsi-

ble for their children again increased feelings of empowerment. Similar to previous research (Clarke-Stewart, 2001; Herrera, 2017), these women plan to continue to pursue personal growth opportunities, leading to higher self-esteem. Easterling (2012) discusses how hard it is for mothers to become parents again after being released from prison. The most important lesson the mothers in this study appeared to have learned is to not take parenting for granted. Their children were their main source of motivation to improve themselves while incarcerated and to focus on renewing their role as a mother.

Continuing Challenges and Needs for More Supports

Even though the parenting class had positive results for the mothers, many additional hardships continue to exist for them. A major finding indicated that all participating mothers experienced various challenges adjusting to their life outside of prison as a person and a parent. The majority of them mentioned that the transition to their life and parenting role after prison is more difficult than expected. The mothers mentioned waiting for their release with anticipation and excitement to reunite with their children and extended family. Some of the perceptions were short lived due to unanticipated challenges. Bambi and Amy both wrote in their parent log that there are days they wish they were back in prison due to the difficulties of adjusting to motherhood and life after prison. Bambi wrote in her parenting log,

It is hard to adjust to life outside of prison and all the demands I have on myself. While I was incarcerated, I knew my children were being cared for and were safe. Now, I have all that responsibility of keeping them safe and happy. It is a lot to process.

These findings suggest an urgent need for continued and additional supports for both parenting and their transition to the after-prison life and provide support for previous studies that uncover challenges including disadvantages educationally, economically, and socially which further perpetuates continuing hardships after prison (Easterling, 2012; Shalfer & Pehlmann, 2010; Vishner & Travis, 2003). These are also similar to the findings in the previous studies (Coates, 2015; Visher & Mallik-Kane, 2007) that show that women released from correctional facilities receive minimal preparation and inadequate assistance and resources, which makes their reentry into communities challenging due to having a criminal conviction.

Several previous studies also acknowledged the importance of ongoing and continued supports for these mothers' adjustment and parenting (Allen, Flaherty, & Ely, 2010; Mapson, 2013; Nelson, Deess, & Allen, 1999). There is a need for ongoing community resources and supports outside prison life. These are imperative to a successful integration back into family-life after incarceration (Allen, Flaherty, & Ely, 2010; Mapson, 2013). In particular, informal social bonds (e.g., faith-based organizations, law abiding neighbors, families, communities) are found to be the strongest predictor of overcoming post incarceration challenges such as committing a crime (Petersilia, 2003). Without strong support in the community to help negotiate the rules and regulations of public agencies, many mothers can quickly recidivate (Mapson, 2013).

Limitations

There are a few limitations of the present study including the relationship between the instructor and mothers. The relationship between the instructor and the mothers can be viewed as both a limitation and an asset. It is possible that the mothers might only share positive experiences with the parenting class because they did not want to disappoint the instructor/researcher by sharing parenting failures during the interviews. The mothers may not have wanted to express any negative components about the shortcomings of the parenting class. Secondly, the small convenience sample of mothers was a limitation. A larger sample would allow the researcher to understand if the majority of mothers parenting abilities were impacted by taking

the parenting class. Thirdly, a longitudinal study following the participants for the next two to four years would offer a window into their ability to adjust to their mothering role after prison. The longitudinal study would address some of the challenges encountered by the mothers to see if the mothers were able to overcome these hardships.

Implications

The findings of the present study regarding parental experiences during and post-incarceration have important implications for practice and policy. There is a growing consensus about the need to address the multifaceted problems of mass incarceration in this nation. Implications for services in the planning and delivery of parenting courses include ensuring high-quality instructors, content tailored to meet the specific needs of parents in prison, a sensitivity to parental adversity, and the availability of ongoing support following release. Increased funding on federal and state levels is imperative to ensure every incarcerated mother has the opportunity to take the course and receive the supports she needs to recover from their past and become a self-sufficient citizen and parent. Providing ongoing support and mentoring as a follow-up to the parenting class such as job training opportunities or community-based support including, support groups for single mothers, mothers dealing with past trauma, or mothers struggling with addictions are critical.

References

- Armstrong, E., Eggins, E., Reid, N., Harnett, P., & Dawe, S. (2017). Parenting interventions for incarcerated parents to improve parenting knowledge and skills, parent well-being, and quality of the parent–child relationship: A systematic review and meta-analysis. *Journal of Experimental Criminology*, 14(3), 279-317. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11292-017-9290-6>
- Annie E. Casey Foundation. (2016). *A shared sentence: The devastating toll of parental incarceration on kids, families, and communities*. Baltimore, MD.
- Aiello, B. L., & McQueeney, K. (2016). How can you live without your kids?: Distancing from and embracing the stigma of “incarcerated mother”. *Journal of Prison Education and Reentry*, 3(1), 32-49.
- Annie E. Casey Foundation. (1999). *Partnerships between corrections and child welfare*. Baltimore, MD. The Women’s Prison Association & Home, Inc.
- Barkley, R. A. (1997). *Defiant children: A clinician’s manual for assessment and parent training* (Vol. 3). New York: The Guildford Press.
- Barlow, Jane, & Coren, E. (2018). The effectiveness of parenting programs: A review of campbell reviews. *Research on Social Work Practice*, 28 (99–102). <https://doi.org/10.1177/1049731517725184>.
- Bell, L. G., & Cornwell, C. S. (2015). Evaluation of a family wellness course for persons in prison. *Journal of Correctional Education*, 66(1), 45-57. ISSN:07402708
- Bloom, B. (2000). Beyond recidivism: Perspectives on evaluation of programs for female offenders in community corrections. In McMahon, M. (Ed.), *Assessment to assistance: Programs for women in community corrections* (pp.107-138). Lanham, MD: American Correctional Association.
- Bloom, B., Owen, B., Covington, S. (2004). Women offenders and the gendered effects of public policy. *Review of Policy Research*, 21, 31-48.
- Blumstein, A., & Beck, A. (1999). Population growth in the U.S. prisons, 1980-1996. *Crime and Justice*, 26, (17-61).
- Bozick, R., Steele, J., Davis, L. et al. (2018). Does providing inmates with education improve post release outcomes? A meta-analysis of correctional education programs in the United States. *Journal of Experimental Criminology*, 14, 389–428. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11292-018-9334-6>
- Bronson, J. (2018). Bureau of Justice Statistics (BJS)- Justice expenditure and employment extracts.
- Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (2009). *Parent training programs: Insight for practitioners*. Atlanta: GA.
- Coll, G., Surrey, J., Buccio-Notaro, P. & MoUa, B. (1998). Incarcerated mothers: Crimes and punishments. In C. Garcia Coll, J. Surrey, & K. Weingarten, (Eds.) *Mothering against the odds: Diverse voices of contemporary mothers* (255-274). New York: Guilford.
- Collica-Cox, K. (2018). Parenting, prison and pups with a purpose: How dog-assisted therapy can improve inmates as mothers. *Corrections Today*. 80(3), 24-32.
- Collica-Cox, K., & Furst, G. (2019). Parenting from a county jail: Parenting from beyond the bars. *Issues in Mental Health Nursing*, 40(7), 593-604. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01612840.2019.1565877>.
- Covington, S. (2002). Women in prison: Approaches in the treatment of our most invisible population. *Women and Therapy* 21, (1), 141–55.
- Covington, S., Bloom, B. (2006). Gender responsive treatment and services in correctional settings. *Women and Therapy*, 29, 9-33.

- Davis, Steele, Bozick, et.al. (2014). How effective is correctional education, and where do we go from here? The results of a comprehensive evaluation.
- Dodge, M., Pogrebin, M. R. (2001). Collateral costs of imprisonment for women: Complications of reintegration. *Prison Journal*, 18, 42-54.
- Department of Education. (2016). Partnerships between postsecondary and penal institutions allow incarcerated individuals to access Pell grants for correctional education. Press release. Washington, DC.
- Durose, M., Cooper, A., Snyder, H. (2014). Recidivism of prisoners released in 30 states in 2005: Patterns from 2005 to 2010. US Department of Justice.
- Easterling, B. (2012). Parenting behind bars: a qualitative study of incarcerated mothers. Tennessee Research and Creative Exchange. University of Tennessee, Knoxville.
- Ghirardelli, P. (2000). Educational theory: Herbart, Dewey, Freire and postmodernists. *The Encyclopedia of Educational Philosophy and Theory*.
- Garcia, J. (2016). Understanding the lives of mothers after incarceration: Moving beyond socially constructed definitions of motherhood. *Sociology Compass* 10 (3-11).
- Hairston, C. (2003). Prisoners and their families: Parenting issues during incarceration. Urban Institute Press, (260-282).
- Herrera, A. (2017). Why Oklahoma has the highest female incarceration rate in the country. *Conflict & Justice*. Reveal Broadcasting.
- Huebner, B. (2010). Women coming home: long term patterns of recidivism. *Justice Quarterly*, 27, 225-254.
- Huebner, C. (2009). Community-based support for preschool readiness among children in poverty. *The Journal of Education for Students Places at Risk*, 5, 291-314.
- Kaistura, A. (2019). Women's mass incarceration: the whole pie 2019. *Prison Policy*.
- Kabel, D. & Cowhig M. (2018) Correctional Populations in the United States. U.S. Department of Justice. Office of Justice Programs. Bureau of Justice Statistics.
- Kids Count. (2016). Data snapshot on high poverty areas. The Annie E. Casey Foundation. Baltimore, MD.
- Larson, B. (2018). Supporting kids of incarcerated parents. University of Wisconsin-Madison.
- Loper, A. B., & Tuerk, E. H. (2011). Improving the emotional adjustment and communication patterns of incarcerated mothers: Effectiveness of a prison parenting intervention. *Journal of Child and Family Studies*, 20, 89–101. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10826-010-9381-8>
- Mapson, A. (2013). From prison to parenting. *Journal of Human Behavior in the Social Environment*, 23, 171-177.
- McGowen, M., & Ladd, L. (2006). Online assessment of grandmother experience in raising grandchildren. *Educational Gerontology*, 32, 669-684.
- Mosley, E. (2018). Incarcerated - Children of parents in prison impacted. Defender Network.
- Mumola, C. (2000). Incarcerated parents and their children. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Justice.
- National Kids Count. (2016). Kids count data center. Annie E. Casey Foundation. Baltimore, MD.
- O'Brien, P. (2001). Making it in the "free world": Women in transition from prison. Albany: State University of New York Press.
- Oklahoma Department of Corrections. (2014). Annual report. Oklahoma City, OK: Oklahoma Department of Corrections.

- Poehlmann, J. Shlafer, R., Maes, E., & Hanneman. (2008). Children's contact with their incarcerated parents: Research findings and recommendations. *American Psychologist*, 65(6), 575-598.
- Pollock, J. M. (2002). Parenting programs in women's prisons. *Women & Criminal Justice*, 14, 131-154.
- Richie, B. (2001). Challenges incarcerated women face as they return to their communities: Findings from life history interviews. *Crime & Delinquency*, 47, 368-389.
- Sharp, E. B. (1994). *The dilemma of drug policy in the United States*. New York, NY: Harper Collins College Publishers.
- Sharp, S., & Marcus-Mendoza, S. (2001). It's a family affair: The effects of incarceration on women and their families. *Women and Criminal Justice*, 12 (4), 21-49.
- Sharp, S. F. (2003). Mothers in prison: Issues in parent-child contact. In Sharp, S. F. (Ed.), *The incarcerated woman: Rehabilitative programming in women's prisons* (pp. 151-166). Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall.
- Sharp, S. (2014). *Mean lives, mean laws: Oklahoma's women prisoners*. Rutgers University Press. New Brunswick, New York, and London.
- Schram, P. J. (2003). Stereotypes and vocational programming for women prisoners. In Sharp, S. F. (Ed.), *The incarcerated woman: Rehabilitative programming in women's prisons*, (pp.17-28). Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall.
- Serketich W.J., Dumas J.E. (2006). The effectiveness of behavioral parent training to modify antisocial behavior in children: a meta-analysis. *Behavior Therapy*, 27, 71-86.
- Sime, D., & Sheridan, M. (2014). You want the best for your kids': improving educational outcomes for children living in poverty through parental engagement. *Educational Research*, 56, (3), 327-342.
- Wakefield, S., & Wildeman, C. (2018). How parental incarceration harms children and what to do about it. *National Council on Family Relations Policy Brief*, 3, (1).
- Wildeman, C., Goldman, A., Turney, K. (2018). Parental incarceration and child health in the United States. *Epidemiologic Reviews*, 40, 146-156.

Dr. Kimberly Phillips is an Assistant Professor and Program Chair of Early Childhood Education at Northeastern State University in Tahlequah, Oklahoma, and has spent the last five years working with incarcerated mothers.

Dr. Kyong-Ah Kwon is an Associate Professor at the University of Oklahoma.