

PORTRAIT OF THE INCARCERATED WOMAN AS A READING MOTHER:
REVEALING THE PERCEIVED OUTCOMES OF A SHARED READING PROGRAM

by

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Submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements
for the degree of Master of Library and Information Studies

at

Dalhousie University
Halifax, Nova Scotia
August 2017

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DEDICATION

To my mom, who read to me.

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ABSTRACT

Each year, 25 000 Canadian children will not share a bedtime story with their mother because their mother is incarcerated. For many families, contact with their incarcerated mother is rare. The separation caused by maternal incarceration can disrupt the attachment bond, create physical and mental health problems, and lead to increased anxiety, depression, loneliness, and isolation. To ameliorate some of these detrimental effects, organizations are delivering programs that allow incarcerated mothers to maintain and strengthen relationships with their children. Read aloud programs are among them. This thesis explores the outcomes of a read aloud program for incarcerated women and their children, from the perspective of those who participated. Six interviews were conducted with former participants of the program and 94 letters from participating families were read. Findings reveal how a shared reading program can provide meaningful mother-child contact, strengthen relationships, encourage love of reading, foster positive identity, and nurture resilience.

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS USED

ACE – Adverse Childhood Experience

CSC – Correctional Service Canada

E Fry SJ – Elizabeth Fry Society of Saint John

RCT – Relational Cultural Theory

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

My warmest thanks to those who held me steady through this process:

the women who generously shared parts of their story with me, for being brave, persistent, and determined to mother;

Vivian and Jennifer, for your trust, enthusiastic support, thorough and thoughtful guidance, and dedication to excellence with grace and good humour;

Judy, for immediately saying yes to this project and finding space to support it while caring and advocating for those who need it most;

Denise, for the introductions and the inspiration;

Keith, for your attentive reading and conscientious, timely feedback;

Julie, for your discerning comments and inspiring me to think more critically and all-inclusively

Nova Scotia Research and Innovation Graduate Scholarship and Dalhousie Faculty of Management Graduate Research Scholarship, for financially supporting this work;

Lauren, for being my bighearted first reader and making the work more clear, confident, and strong;

Robyn, for offering insight, unwavering support, and a quiet space in which to write;

friends and family, for listening, encouraging, and providing laughter and perspective;

Sam, for baking the cookies and still holding my hand on walks;

Maeve, for your persistent optimism and constant (but delightful) interruptions;

and Dan, for making all things possible.

CHAPTER 1. INTRODUCTION

Family legend has it that one evening when I was four, tucked in bed and storybook closed, I declared I was never, not ever, going to sleep at the end of a day until my mother read to me. It was impossible for me to imagine I would ever be able to close my eyes without hearing my mother's voice as she read to me stories of mischievous rabbits, children exploring their snow-draped city, and the ku-plink, ku-plank, ku-plunk of blueberries dropping in a tin pail. Horn Book editor Martha V. Parravano (2010) writes of how the circle created by the caregiver, the child, and the picture book provides a unique and magical sanctuary in which bonds can be strengthened. Now, as a mother, I have the privilege and pleasure of creating such a circle with my own children.

For 25 000 Canadian children, the reading circle is shattered when their mothers are incarcerated. Women are the fastest growing prison population in Canada. About two-thirds of them are the primary caregivers of children under the age of eighteen (Canadian Association of Elizabeth Fry Societies, 2013). The wellbeing of those children is often closely tied to that of their mothers' incarceration. Among the multitude of things these children lose is the powerful experience and benefits of shared reading.

For many families, contact with incarcerated mothers is rare. Federal prisons are generally far from home – sometimes thousands of kilometres away, and phone calls are prohibitively expensive (Donovan, 2017; Cunningham & Baker, 2003; Feminist Alliance for International Action, 2008). Research has begun to identify how

the separation caused by maternal incarceration affects mothers and their children. It can disrupt the attachment bond, lead to child displacement, and for both mothers and children, it can create physical and mental health problems and lead to increased aggression, depression, anxiety, loneliness, and isolation (Allen, Flaherty, & Ely, 2010; Arditti, 2014; Hairston, 2007; Gardner, 2015; Christian, 2009; Phillips, Errantly, Keeler, Costello, Angold, & Johnston, 2006; Cunningham & Baker, 2003). Most incarcerated mothers will return to their community and want to reunite with their children. Reunification can be very difficult if they have not been able to communicate regularly with their families (Nesmith & Ruhland, 2008).

In response, a number of organizations and institutions are delivering programs that allow incarcerated mothers to maintain and strengthen relationships with their children. Shared reading or read aloud programs (the two terms will be used interchangeably throughout this thesis) are among them. These programs seek to simultaneously support family literacy and strengthen family bonds. Though there are variations across programs, most involve mothers selecting books for their children and reading them aloud into a recording device. The recordings and books are then sent to their children on the outside.

The social science literature is remarkably devoid of studies that amplify the voices and perspectives of the families affected by maternal incarceration. Even fewer studies are designed to explore the outcomes of prison-based shared reading programs. This thesis research aims to do both. Situated within one shared reading program, the Mother-Child Read Aloud Program offered at Nova Institution for

Women, this thesis explores the perceived outcomes of the program by examining the experiences of six former participants and several participating families. From a feminist and ecological systems perspective, this research suggests how the shared reading program strengthens relationships, encourages love of reading, nurtures resilience, and repairs the reading circle.

This thesis is divided into six chapters. This first chapter presents a brief introduction to the research focus. Chapter 2 provides a review of the relevant literature and outlines the analytical framework and research questions that guided this study. A description of the methodological approach, ethical considerations, and study limitations are delineated in Chapter 3. The research findings are presented in Chapter 4, with descriptions of the primary themes and direct quotes shared by the women and their families. Those findings are discussed and contextualized in Chapter 5, highlighting the study's implications for theory, practice, and future research. Chapter 6 concludes the study. Supporting documentation is found in the Appendices.

CHAPTER 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Speaking at the 2016 Book Trust Annual Lecture, award-winning children's writer Michael Morpurgo lamented how literacy both defines and divides us, and describes the gap that exists

between those who read, who through books, through developing an enjoyment of literature, can have the opportunity to access the considerable cultural and material benefits of our society; and those who were made to feel very early on that the world of words, of books, of stories, of ideas, was not for them, that they were not clever enough to join that world, that it was not the world they belonged to, that it was shut off from them forever. (Morpurgo, 2016)

Research continues to reveal the benefits children garner from being on the "right" side of that divide, where children are regularly read aloud to and encouraged to understand that the world of books and ideas is for them. Yet far too many children remain on the "wrong" side of that divide, encountering more barriers of access to the world of books, stories, and shared reading. Children of incarcerated parents encounter a literal wall that fortifies the literacy divide.

This chapter synthesizes the literature that informed and inspired my research, exploring how the Mother-Child Read Aloud Program can penetrate that divide. First, it examines the state of maternal incarceration in Canada and the reported effects of this experience on women and their families. An overview of the extensive benefits of shared family reading is provided. Further, the review

highlights some of the types of shared family reading programs offered to incarcerated men and women and describes the Mother-Child Read Aloud Program offered at the Nova Institution for Women in Truro, Nova Scotia. Next, the theoretical concepts and models that serve as the analytical framework for my research are outlined. The review culminates in identifying the research questions that guided this study.

2.1 MATERNAL INCARCERATION

Research, policies, and programmatic responses within the criminal legal system have traditionally focused on the experiences and needs of men, resulting in a lack of appropriate, gender-responsive services and treatment for women (Covington, 2002; Neve & Pate, 2005). To design and implement effective and meaningful programs for women, it is vital to understand the demographics, experiences, strengths, and needs of women incarcerated in Canada. The same is needed to evaluate the outcomes of the Mother-Child Read Aloud Program.

2.1.1 FEDERALLY INCARCERATED WOMEN IN CANADA: FACTS AND FIGURES

Over the last decade, the number of federally sentenced women increased 50% (compared to an increase of less than 10% for men) despite multiple reports and national inquiries that have concluded “prison is rarely a necessary, appropriate or proportionate response to women who get caught up in the criminal justice system” (Prison Reform Trust, 2015, para. 9). As of April 2014, there were a total of 1,098 federally sentenced women offenders (Statistics Canada, 2016). More

than 70% of these federally incarcerated women have children under the age of eighteen (Sapers, 2015). Furthermore, while Indigenous women make up only 3% of the female population in Canada, they represent 35.5% of federally sentenced women (Arriagada, 2016; Sapers, 2015). According to the former Correctional Investigator of Canada, Howard Sapers, this disproportionate rate of incarceration is linked to Canada's discriminatory judicial system, history of colonialism, systemic discrimination, economic inequities, substance abuse, and violence (Sapers, 2015).

2.1.2 PATHWAYS TO CRIME

The portrait of incarcerated women reveals they are among the most economically and socially disadvantaged segments of the Canadian population. Kim Pate, independent Senator and former Executive Director of the Canadian Association of Elizabeth Fry Societies, attributes the upsurge in women's incarceration to political, economic, legal, and social policy decisions that have criminalized the most vulnerable of our community members (Neve & Pate, 2005). She writes further, "The inadequacy of social, economic and health programs have resulted in the use of the criminal system as a default response to issues that it is not designed to handle" (Pate, 2017, para. 3). Women's choices to break the law are usually made in circumstances where there are few alternatives to provide for themselves or their families (Pate, 2006; Byrne & Trew, 2008).

Another potential contributor to the rise in women serving sentences is the outcome of the Harper government's "Tough on Crime" strategy. While in power, the Harper government passed a range of legislation with the stated intention of

addressing crime, including the introduction of mandatory minimum sentences. At the same time, dramatic budget cuts were made to both social services and correctional services (Comack, Fabre, & Burgher, 2015). The simultaneous growth in prison population and cutbacks in the budget of Correctional Service Canada (CSC) have resulted in increased use of force and solitary confinement, as well as more assaults and self-injuries (Sapers, 2015). Reductions in or elimination of women-centred, gender-responsive programming, including shared reading programs for families, have occurred across most institutions (personal communication, August 19, 2016).

Research has established that the life experiences of women involved in the criminal legal system are typically different than those of men. These experiences include lifelong situations of abuse, poverty, mental illness, addictions, restricted resources, lack of social supports, and unhealthy relationships (Salisbury & Voorhis, 2009; Christian, 2009; Trost, 2009; Sarra, 2013; Allen, Flaherty, & Ely, 2010). The number of Canadian incarcerated women who have a history of abuse is exceedingly high: 70% have experienced sexual abuse and 86% have experienced physical abuse (Barrett, Allenby, & Taylor, 2010). Incarcerated women are twice as likely as incarcerated men to have been diagnosed with a serious mental health illness or to be serving a sentence for a drug-related offence. They are also more likely to be serving shorter sentences (Sapers, 2015). Nearly two-thirds of incarcerated women were the primary caregivers of their children at the time of their arrest (Barret, Allenby, & Taylor, 2010).

2.1.3 IDENTITY AS MOTHER

Researchers are beginning to explore the needs and perceptions of incarcerated women as they relate to their role as mothers. These limited studies indicate that mothers report feelings of despair, anxiety, anger, shame, and guilt, as well as decreased self-esteem and a sense of loss due to the separation from their children (LeFlore & Holston, 1989; Young & Jefferson Smith, 2000; Allen, Flaherty, & Ely, 2010; Arditti, 2014). Incarcerated mothers express deep concern for their children's wellbeing and anxiety their children will be made permanent wards of the state (Canadian Association of Elizabeth Fry Societies, 2013; Young & Jefferson Smith, 2000; Allen, Flaherty, & Ely, 2010; Arditti, 2014).

That mothers are innately nurturing and imbued with a moral identity of worth and honourable character is commonly held as self-evident in our culture (DeVault, 1994; Easterling, 2012; Barnes & Stringer, 2013). For incarcerated mothers, the transition from moral backbone of society to convicted criminal is particularly harsh and unforgiving. Incarcerated mothers are among the most stigmatized women in society. Their experience during and after incarceration is often shaped by their work to challenge or resist the stigma and label of being a "bad mother" (Correctional Service Canada, 2013; Canadian Association of the Elizabeth Fry Societies; 2013; Arditti, 2014). Research suggests the preservation of the mother-child bond, a good mother-caregiver relationship, and the expectation of maintaining custody are crucial in protecting this maternal identity (Barnes & Stringer, 2013; Easterling, 2012).

2.1.4 IMPLICATIONS FOR CHILDREN

Maternal incarceration often results in collateral consequences for their children, including health and behavioural problems (Murphey & Cooper, 2015). It is a challenge, though, for researchers to isolate the effects of maternal incarceration from the effects of pre-existing family challenges such as parental substance abuse, mental illness, financial insecurity, and domestic abuse (Phillips, Errantly, Keeler, Costello, Angold, & Johnston, 2006; Christian, 2009). Additionally, causal links between maternal incarceration and children's outcomes cannot be established due to the methodological limitations of most of the studies examining maternal incarceration impact: small sample sizes, secondary analyses of data in longitudinal studies, and a lack of comparative studies.

However, evidence suggests that independent of pre-existing factors, some psychological and social stresses are linked to maternal incarceration including family, economic, and household instability (Phillips, Errantly, Keeler, Costello, Angold, & Johnston, D, 2006; Cunningham & Baker, 2003). When a mother goes to prison, only five per cent of children stay in their original household (Malone, 2016). Some stay with family members, while others are placed in alternative care where it can be more difficult to access education or health services and where they may be more vulnerable to neglect or violence (Arditti, 2014; Christian, 2009; Cunningham & Baker, 2003, Hairston, 2007). Moreover, maternal incarceration and the subsequent separation of a child from his or her mother can in some cases lead to an "adverse childhood experience" (ACE), a harmful and unique combination of trauma, shame,

and stigma (Hairston, 2007; Murphey & Cooper, 2015). ACE has been linked to separation anxiety, sense of loss, depression, aggression, mental illness, and poor academic performance (Hairston, 2007, Gardner, 2015; Christian, 2009; Dallaire, 2007; Murphey & Cooper, 2015).

Some children navigate their mother's incarceration with relatively few adverse outcomes and do not engage in antisocial behaviour (Hairston, 2007; Christian, 2009). Indeed, many children demonstrate resilience in the face of this significant adversity (Luthar, Cicchetti, & Becker, 2000). The factors that influence the impact of maternal incarceration include the age, sex, predisposition, and coping skills of the child, the quality of the mother-child relationship and the mother-caregiver relationship before and during incarceration, the quality of the child's living arrangement before and during incarceration, and the quality of contact the child has with his or her incarcerated mother (Christian, 2009; Cunningham & Baker, 2003; Dallaire, 2007).

Policies, procedures, and 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). They can improve the chances for positive reunification upon release and increase the likelihood of post-release success (Young & Jefferson Smith, 2000; Hairston, 2007; Mignon & Ransford, 2012; Sapers, 2015). One type of programming designed to increase the quality of contact between incarcerated mothers and their children is shared reading.

2.2 SHARED READING WITH CHILDREN

Evidence points to how reading together promotes a strong, loving relationship and a secure emotional attachment (Bus, 2001). Reading with a child increases caregiver confidence, sparks a deeper interest in the child's life, and strengthens parenting capacity (Demack & Stevens, 2013; Seden, 2008; Blumberg & Griffin, 2013). Sharing books together in the home can provide a valuable platform for discussions, debate, and play. Exposure to stories nurtures empathy, deepens the imagination, and opens a window to a range of experiences children can learn from as they navigate their world (Demack & Stephens, 2013; Cunningham & Zilbulsky, 2010; Blewitt, Rump, Shealy & Cook, 2009).

Being read to as a child supports emerging literacy skills that are crucial for academic success and personal fulfillment (Swick, 2009). Early exposure to reading supports vocabulary, phonics, and language development, grammatical understanding, and knowledge of print concepts. It predicts reading success and improves listening, attention, and comprehension skills (Lane & Wright, 2007; Massaro, 2015; Cunningham & Zilbulsky, 2010; Blewitt, Rump, Shealy & Cook, 2009). Moreover, a child's achievement in school is linked to their perception of their parent's interest in and approval of them, both of which are reinforced through shared reading (Blumberg & Griffin, 2013).

Researchers have found the quality of the reading experience matters more than the quantity in supporting literacy skills and facilitating language development (Zucker, Cabell, Justice, Pentimonti, & Kaderavek, 2013; Morgan & Meier, 2008;

Dexter & Stacks, 2014). Interactive, engaged reading that prompts thoughtful conversation and reflection has been shown to increase children's literacy and social skills (Morgan & Meier, 2008; Duursma, Augustyn, & Zuckerman, 2010). In a 2006 study, Weigel, Martin, and Bennet noted, "Parents who express positive attitudes about reading and actively engage their children in literacy enhancing activities are creating an atmosphere of enthusiasm for literacy and learning" (p. 374). The quality of the parent-child relationship has been demonstrated to have a unique contribution to children's development of reading achievement (Merlo, Bowman, & Barnett, 2007; Bus & Ijzendoorn, 1988).

Shared family reading, together with parental modeling and promotion of reading, increases the likelihood children will read for pleasure in the future (Zucker, Cabell, Justice, Pentimonti, & Kaderavek, 2013; Baker & Scher, 2002). When stories are read aloud, children connect the books with the beloved, reassuring sound of the caregiver's voice, helping to build a lifelong positive association with reading (Blumberg & Griffin, 2013; Demack & Stephens, 2013; Cunningham & Zilbulsky, 2010). Importantly, research suggests children who have access to books at home, and whose parents promote reading for pleasure, are more likely to be strong, confident readers, regardless of socioeconomic status (Clark & Akerman, 2006; Baker & Scher, 2002).

A recent review of the literature commissioned by The Reading Agency (2015) revealed reading for pleasure can lead to greater self-awareness, empathy, social and cultural capital, focus, relaxation, and communication skills. Those who

read because they enjoy it are more likely to read frequently and widely. Reading for pleasure is linked to strong emotional literacy, social inclusion, improved academic achievement, higher employment levels, and increased levels of trust, confidence, tolerance, and self-esteem (Nikolajeva, 2013; Pabion & Howard, 2016).

Reading with children, engaging them in careful listening, questioning, and responding, can lay important groundwork for critical thinking (Pressley, 2006). Critical literacy skills enable children to analyze and interpret the world. In his seminal 1970 work, Freire insisted literacy should give people the tools of emancipation against their oppressors. Through engaged shared reading, children can develop different ways of thinking, consider new perspectives, question the way things are, and develop ideas for personal and social change. Developing these skills could be particularly important for marginalized children.

2.3 PRISON READ ALOUD PROGRAMS

According to Blumberg & Griffin (2013), prison reading programs “feed two birds with one seed by benefiting inmates and their children in numerous ways” (p. 265).¹ Prison staff and community-based organizations have established a variety of family literacy programs in prisons with the aim of building the literacy skills of inmates and their children while maintaining and strengthening family connection during maternal incarceration.² Underpinning these programs is an effort to provide

¹ Though the focus of this research is on shared reading family programs for mothers and their children, it should be noted that there are several similar programs established for men.

² In her comparative study of UK and US prison family literacy programs, Finlay (2014) noted that programs in the UK tend to be national, standardized schemes run by prisons. Programs in the US

a meaningful opportunity for mothers to play a significant role in their children's lives; they have a chance to view and present themselves in the role of competent and caring mother, not just prisoner (Kerka, 1995; Loring, 2012; Muth, 2006; Walden, 2004).

Though an inventory of shared reading programs is beyond the scope of this investigation, it is important to note the variety of types. Some programs offer live videoconferencing where the parent reads to the child in real-time. These programs are often run in collaboration with public libraries that set up rooms for families to receive the live-feed of the parent reading (Weller, 2016). Other programs incorporate extensive literacy and parenting workshops that involve demonstrations of effective book-sharing, an introduction to excellent children's literature, child psychology and development concepts, information on how to be a positive reading role model and use the public library as a valuable resource, as well as art, journal writing, and role play (Lehmann, 2009; United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization, 2012; Finlay, 2014). Still other programs support authors and storytellers to perform on family visiting days (Loring, 2012; Gardner, 2015; Finlay, 2014).

Most shared reading programs offered to incarcerated women, including the Mother-Child Read Aloud Program at Nova Institution for Women, are straight-

tend to be delivered by individual institutions, community organizations, or libraries and are thus able to be more responsive and sensitive to the context and needs of their particular users (Muth, 2011; Finlay, 2014).

forward in their implementation and delivery. Typically, volunteers bring in a wide range of board books, picture books, and novels from which women can make selections. After practicing, the mothers record a CD or DVD reading the chosen stories aloud, which is then sent, together with the books, to their children (Finlay, 2014; Trost, 2009; Duncan, 2011.) Among the advantages to this type of program are its simplicity, its appeal, and its cost-effectiveness (Blumberg & Griffin, 2013; Finlay, 2014; Duncan, 2011).

Though enthusiastic participation and much anecdotal evidence points to the success and benefits of read aloud programs for incarcerated parents, existing studies are overwhelmingly descriptive rather than evaluative (Blumberg & Griffin, 2013; Muth, 2006). In a 2006 review of the literature, Muth declared much of this research is inconclusive, lacking in rigour, and does not reveal the key elements of the programs that increase efficacy or promote positive outcomes. However, he nonetheless concluded family literacy programs could, to varying degrees and for both incarcerated parents and their children, improve literacy practices and academic gain, increase levels of engagement, facilitate changes in self-perception and world-perception, and improve behaviour (Muth, 2006).

Studies that gather the opinions and perspectives of program volunteers or administrators on the outcomes of read aloud programs suggest several benefits: establishment of sustained parent-child relationships; improved empathy; literacy skills; academic interest and reading habits; shared parent-child enthusiasm to discuss books; improved confidence and self-esteem; and eased reunification upon

release (Finlay, 2014; Gardner, 2015; Walden, 2004; Lehmann, 2011; Duncan, 2011). A notable benefit to shared reading programs is the deeper awareness created among inmates of the important role reading can play in the educational, personal, and social lives of their children (Finlay, 2014).

2.4 MOTHER-CHILD READ ALOUD PROGRAM AT NOVA INSTITUTION FOR WOMEN

In 2000, the Elizabeth Fry Society of Saint John (E Fry SJ) began operating the Mother-Child Read Aloud Program, initially at the Saint John Correctional Centre, New Brunswick and then expanded to the federal Nova Institution for Women in Truro, Nova Scotia. Modeled after programs established in the United States, it was founded by Marianna Stack, a retired schoolteacher and co-founder of E Fry SJ. Inspired by the success and innovation of the program, other Elizabeth Fry Societies and organizations have since adapted similar programs across Canada.

The program was delivered four to six times a year. The week before each session was offered, a sign-up sheet was posted in a common area of the prison where the women indicated their interest to participate. For each session, volunteers left Saint John early in the morning and traveled four hours to Halifax to pick up boxes of new books purchased through First Book Canada. The collection of books was diverse, multi-lingual, and included multiple copies of popular titles for all ages. When the volunteers arrived at Nova, they set up the books, largely by age group, on tables in the program room.

As the participants (usually mothers, but sometimes grandmothers, aunts, sisters, and close friends) walked in, they selected up to three books. They had a chance to practice reading and then were given a recording device and a quiet room where they recorded themselves reading aloud. E Fry SJ packaged the books and the recordings and sent them to the families the next day. The packages were made to look as if they were sent by the mothers themselves. A one-time gift of a Walkman was also sent to the families (personal communication, August 19, 2016; Elizabeth Fry Society of Saint John, 2013; MacDonald, 2009).

The Mother-Child Read Aloud Program at Nova reached 780 women and nearly 2000 children, with over 5000 books sent to participating families. To sustain the program, E Fry SJ relied heavily on donations from individuals, organizations, authors, and publishers for funds, books, and volunteer time. The primary funder was Correctional Service Canada, Atlantic. In 2015, the Mother-Child Read Aloud Program was put on hold. That year, CSC brought in new guidelines for clearance and all agencies and organizations who held contracts with CSC had to reapply for clearance. E Fry SJ reapplied under this new regulation but it took many, many months for the application to be processed and cleared. Upon receiving clearance to begin offering the Mother-Child Read Aloud Program again, E Fry SJ was told by Nova Institution for Women and CSC Atlantic that the funds for the program had been redirected to other services. They had to wait for the next fiscal year, 2017, for approval for funding. They are still waiting (personal communication, August 19, 2016).

Understanding the experiences and perceived outcomes of those who participated in the Mother-Child Read Aloud Program can inform the development and sustained support of effective programs for incarcerated mothers and their children. A theoretical framework can facilitate an interpretation and understanding of those experiences.

2.5 THEORETICAL CONCEPTS AND MODELS

Four key constructs serve as the theoretical underpinning of this research: Feminist Theory, Relational Cultural Theory, an integration of Bowlby's Attachment Theory and Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory, and the science of Resilience. I use these constructs to understand, contextualize, and frame the Mother-Child Read Aloud Program as a programmatic response that mediates the individual, relational, institutional, and social effects of maternal incarceration.

2.5.1 FEMINIST THEORY: POSITIONING WOMEN AS EXPERTS

A feminist standpoint is a way of understanding the world, a point of view of social reality, that begins with, and is developed directly from, women's experiences. The next step is to draw on what we have learned from women's experiences, to apply that feminist standpoint toward bettering the condition of women and creating social change. Women's experiences not only point to us flaws in larger economic and political systems but also offer potential solutions to these flaws. (Brooks & Hesse-Biber, 2007, p.60)

All researchers carry with them personal experiences, assumptions, biases, and theoretical perspectives. At the heart of my research is feminist theory; it influenced the selection of my research questions and methodology. Feminist research explicitly acknowledges the intersecting issues of power and oppression, recognizes knowledge is socially situated and constructed, uncovers and amplifies women's voices, and demands reflexivity (Harding, 1986). Furthermore, feminist inquiry is interdisciplinary, highly contextualized, participatory, collaborative, and oriented to social change (Patton, 2002; Brisolara, 2014).

No single feminist theory or approach unifies feminist research (Brisolara, 2014). Feminist empiricism, feminist standpoint theory, and feminist poststructuralism are widely held to be the main feminist research philosophies, each with varying challenges and opportunities for the researcher (Ramazanoglu, 2002; Harding, 2004). My research does not strictly adhere to one particular feminist philosophy. Instead, it borrows from each and is informed by a feminist perspective that questions and critiques systems, structures, ideologies, and practices that have marginalized women and seeks to empower, give voice, and enable social transformation (Ramazanoglu, 2002; Brooks & Hesse-Biber, 2007). I regard incarcerated women and their families as knowledge holders and understand they have been criminalized and marginalized through intersecting social forces. I seek to understand their experiences as expressed through their perspectives and interpretations.

2.5.2 RELATIONAL-CULTURAL THEORY

Relational Cultural Theory (RCT) is a comprehensive, organic theory of development that emerged with the recognition that traditional models of development do not address the centrality of the relational experiences of women and other marginalized groups (Miller, 1986). Where traditional development models position separation, self-sufficiency, and autonomy as indicators of maturity and wellness, RCT is a more inclusive model that explores how individuals long for and move toward connection and relationships with others and their surroundings, rather than separate from them (Miller, 1986; Hartling, 2008). RCT identifies how contextual and relational factors facilitate or impede a person's ability to establish, nurture, and share in empathetic, growth-fostering relationships throughout a person's life span (Miller, 1976; Comstock, 2005; Comstock, Daniels, & D'Andrea, 2006).

The guiding principle of RCT is that connection, not separation, is the path to healthy growth (Jordan, Kaplan, & Miller, Stiver, & Surrey 1991). According to Miller (1986), "five good things" result from being in a relational connection.

1. Each person feels a greater sense of zest (vitality, energy)
2. Each person feels more able to act and does act in the world
3. Each person has a more accurate picture of her/himself and the other person(s)
4. Each person feels a greater sense of worth
5. Each person feels more connected to other persons and exhibits a greater motivation to connect with other people beyond those in one's primary relationships. (p. 2)

Conversely in disconnection, people feel disempowered, have less energy, are unable to act constructively, and experience a decreased sense of lucidity and self-worth (Jordan & Dooley, 2000). This disconnection can lead to feelings of shame, fear, frustration, isolation, humiliation, and oppression (Hartling, Rosen, Walker, & Jordan, 2000; Birrell & Freyd, 2006).

Incarcerated women's lives are typically marked by disconnection, isolation, violation, and an absence of growth-fostering relationships, even before imprisonment (Covington, 2002). Further, their movement toward connection is influenced by their cultural context that is "raced, engendered, sexualized, and situated along dimensions of class, physical ability, religion, and whatever constructions carry ontological significance in the culture" (Walker, 2010, p. 90). Upon incarceration, the situation is often exacerbated; most women experience an immediate, harsh detachment from their own identity and their relationships to their families, their communities, and society-at-large (Covington, 2007). Most prison environments, policies, and programs, created for and by men, further fracture interpersonal relationships. This study examines if and how the Mother-Child Read Aloud Program reflects what is understood about how women grow and develop, and if and how it facilitates a healthy, growth-fostering relationship between incarcerated mothers and their children.

2.5.3 AN INTEGRATION OF BOWLBY'S ATTACHMENT THEORY AND BRONFENBRENNER'S ECOLOGICAL SYSTEMS MODEL

Bowlby's Attachment Theory and Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Model are effective approaches to the examination of the effects of parental incarceration (Arditti, 2005; Murray & Murray, 2010; Poehlmann, Dallaire, Loper, & Shear, 2010; Stein, 2014). Attachment theory describes how the quality of the parent-child relationship influences the child's subsequent relationships and health (Bowlby, 1982). Bronfenbrenner's (1979) model emphasizes the role that multiple, interrelated contexts and settings play in shaping a person's development.

Bowlby's Attachment Theory posits a secure attachment during childhood is vital for healthy development. The four features of secure attachment are proximity maintenance (wanting to be near those with whom we are attached), safe haven from fear or stress, separation distress, and secure base from which to explore the world (Bowlby, 1982). A secure attachment promotes resilience and helps one face adversity. Children who have insecure attachments are more prone to anxiety, anger, depression, and behavioural problems throughout the life span (Bowlby, 1982; Murray & Murray, 2010). When a child is separated from the primary caregiver, such as during parental incarceration, the attachment bond is threatened (Murray & Murray, 2010; Poehlmann, Dallaire, Loper, & Shear, 2010; Stein, 2014).

The attachment between an incarcerated mother and her children is influenced by multiple, complex, overlapping, and interdependent systems. These include but are not limited to family, institutional, legal, economic, cultural, and social

systems (Holmes, Belmonte, Wentworth, & Tillman, 2010). Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems model provides a robust framework for understanding how an individual's growth and development is influenced by context. In this model, the ecological environment is thought to be comprised of four nested systems: the microsystem, the mesosystem, the exosystem, and the macrosystem (Bronfenbrenner, 1979).

The microsystem is that setting which is immediate and contains the person, family, home, friends, peers etc. (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Maternal incarceration creates a huge disruption to a child's microsystem and can result in household and financial instability, sibling separation, stigma, health problems, and increased risk of neglect, violence, and poverty (Hairston, 2007; Gardner, 2015; Christian, 2009; Cunningham & Baker, 2003;). Within the microsystem, ongoing maternal-child contact and the caregiver-child relationship are determinants of development.

Mesosystems are the connections and links across microsystems (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Key for incarcerated mothers and their children here is the relationship between the mother and the person caring for her children (Arditti, 2005; Holmes, Belmonte, Wentworth, & Tillman, 2010; Poehlmann, Dallaire, Loper, & Shear, 2010). Research has established positive mother-caregiver relationships are linked to healthier child development (Poehlmann, Schlafer, Maes, & Hanneman, 2008; Christian, 2009; Cunningham & Baker, 2003; Dallaire, 2007). Exosystems include contexts and factors that influence an individual's development indirectly. The health, characteristics, and support network of the mother and caregiver, the

particular context of maternal incarceration, and prison policies and practices all influence development within this system (Holmes, Belmonte, Wentworth, & Tillman, 2010).

Lastly, the macrosystem involves the “overarching patterns of ideology and organization of the social institutions common to a particular culture or subculture” (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, p. 8) and includes the economic, social, education, health, legal, and political systems. Critical for incarcerated mothers and their children are the societal attitudes about incarceration and the economic, racial, judicial, and educational disparities in incarceration rates (Poehlmann, Dallaire, Loper, & Shear, 2010; Stein, 2014).

2.5.4 RESILIENCE

As noted earlier, there is variation in how children respond to the experience of their mother’s incarceration. While it is imperative that we examine, understand, and resist the social forces that create the need for resilience, it is also useful to understand why and how some individuals continue to function capably under conditions of significant adversity, trauma, tragedy, or stress (Arditti, 2005).

Resilience science explores that why and how. Resilience is not static; it is understood as dynamic, systemic processes that foster positive adaptation and shift both contextually and along with changing risk and protective factors (Ungar, 2011; Masten & Cicchetti, 2016).

This growing body of research seeks to uncover and understand the social and ecological factors that support an individual’s sustained well-being in times of

stress (Ungar, 2011). Arditti (2005) notes an “ecological perspective recognizes the multiple spheres of influence in risk and resilience across time” (p. 257). From this ecological perspective, the micro, meso, exo, and macro systems are nested contexts where resilience can be fostered (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Ungar, Ghazinour, & Richter (2013) concur, stating “it is children’s interactions with multiple reciprocating systems, and the quality of those systems, that account for most of children’s developmental success under negative stress (their resilience)” (p. 349). Individuals must navigate and respond to interpersonal, social, economic, political, and cultural influences that increase risk or support resilience (Masten & Monn, 2015; Ungar, 2011).

Developmental, social science, and family systems researchers are deepening our understanding of family resilience, a concept particularly relevant to this study. Family resilience considers the functioning of the whole family unit (as defined by the family itself, recognizing the diversity and variety of family structures) in its efforts to withstand adversity. This perspective is strength-based and focuses on the family’s capacity to repair and grow through the difficult experience (Walsh, 2003). Importantly, a family resilience framework considers a family’s resources, constraints, strengths, and challenges in relation to its specific values, social and economic location, and culture, and understands these can vary over time.

Based on her clinical and research experience, Walsh identified nine key transactional processes that enable and nurture family resilience. According to Walsh (2016), “Key transactional processes enable the family to rally in highly

stressful times: to take positive steps, to buffer disruptions, to reduce the risk of dysfunction, and to support positive adaption and resourcefulness in meeting future challenges.” These processes are organized in three domains of family functioning: family belief systems (making meaning of diversity, positive outlook, spirituality); organization patterns (flexibility, connectedness, ability to mobilize social and economic resources); and communication and problem solving (clarity, open emotional sharing, collaborative problem solving) (Walsh, 2003, 2013, 2016).

Research suggests the protective factors fostering resilience in the families experiencing incarceration include secure attachment, high-quality caregiving arrangement and relationship, family and community support, economic resources, literacy skills, evidence-based and strength-based interventions, and family-friendly prison policies (Masten, 2014; Murray & Murray, 2010; Poehlmann, Dallaire, Loper, & Shear, 2010; VanderStaay, 2006). These factors are interdependent and cumulative (VanderStaay, 2006).

The family resilience framework is important for the current study as it considers the centrality of relationships to resilience, and focuses on how families can use their strengths and access protective resources to overcome challenges and promote well-being and development. In this study, I consider if and how the Mother-Child Read Aloud Program directly or indirectly supports the key processes that nurture resilience of incarcerated mothers and their families.

2.6 RESEARCH QUESTIONS

This study 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. It also emerges from a desire to understand if and how shared reading can strengthen family relationships, build family literacy, and foster resilience. This qualitative case study will address the following 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?
2. 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?

2.7 SUMMARY

A review of the literature lays the groundwork for this present research. It reveals incarcerated women are disproportionately Indigenous and likely to have experienced cumulative hardships like poverty, violence, addiction, and mental health challenges. Most are single mothers. Once in prison, they face a system that was created by and for men, a system that does not account for nor respond to their unique experiences or needs. Due to the separation, many women and children

experience aggression, anxiety, depression, isolation and other behavior and health problems.

Shared reading programs are among the interventions designed to alleviate some of these problems by maintaining and strengthening family relationships through sharing children's books. The Mother-Child Read Aloud Program seeks to extend the significant benefits of shared reading to incarcerated women and their families: deeper parent-child engagement, improved literacy skills and academic gain, increased confidence, and a life-long love of reading.

Social science researchers are increasingly recognizing the value of a holistic approach. Feminist researchers emphasize knowledge is socially constructed and experiences are contextualized and intersecting. It seeks to critique oppressive systems and amplify marginalized voices. Relational Cultural Theory is an inclusive model that examines the contextual factors that facilitate or impede a person's move toward connection and relationships. Attachment Theory emphasizes the critical role of the parent-child relationship for healthy development. Ecological Systems Model explores how interdependent settings and systems shape a person's secure attachments and healthy development. Finally, Family Resilience Theory investigates the key processes that nurture a family's capacity to adapt and grow through adversity. My research uses these constructs as an analytical framework to explore if and how the Mother-Child Read Aloud Program promotes family connection, builds family literacy skills, encourages love of reading, fosters empowerment and positive identity, and facilitates family and community re-entry.

CHAPTER 3. METHODOLOGY

Stories go in circles. They don't go in straight lines. It helps if you listen in circles because there are stories inside and between stories, and finding your way through them is as easy and as hard as finding your way home. Part of finding is getting lost, and when you are lost you start to open up and listen. (Tafoya, 1995, p. 12)

In trying to uncover stories that reveal how the Mother-Child Read Aloud Program affected the lives of incarcerated women and their families, I traveled many circles. Developing partnerships, securing permissions, and determining interview details all required patience, flexibility, and procedural navigation. This chapter outlines the methods that informed and guided the research journey. I open the chapter with a discussion of the qualitative case study approach. Next, I review my data collection and data analysis methods. I conclude the chapter with an examination of the ethical considerations and study limitations.

3.1 QUALITATIVE CASE STUDY RESEARCH

To amplify the voices and share the perspectives of former participants of the Mother-Child Read Aloud Program, I chose a qualitative case study approach 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 (Stake, 2003; Leedy & Ormrod, 2016; Elman, Gerring, & 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 (Stake, 2003; Yin, 2014).

One community-based organization's program was studied to advance the understanding of the role that a shared reading program plays in supporting the lives of incarcerated women and their families. The Mother-Child Read Aloud Program, offered at Nova Institution for Women by Elizabeth Fry Society of Saint John (E Fry SJ), 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, & 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.

It is my hope that the findings from this study will help to refine theory, reshape public perceptions and policies, identify key components for effective programs that serve this marginalized population, and suggest further research avenues. It is my belief that case study research best facilitates those goals (Stake, 2003; Elman, Gerring, & Mahoney, 2016).

3.2 DATA COLLECTION

In accordance with both my feminist approach to the research and the case study methodology, I collected data through in-depth, semi-structured interviews with former participants of the Mother-Child Read Aloud Program, and through a review of letters received by E Fry SJ, from participating mothers' families or their children's caregivers. This method allowed me to uncover and explore the outcomes

of the program from the marginalized perspective of participating mothers and their families.

Following a review of the literature and deriving from my main research questions, I crafted open-ended interview questions; my thesis supervisors and E Fry SJ staff examined and approved them (see Appendix C for a complete list of questions). The questions were designed to allow for expansion, spontaneity, and digression, and to give the interviewee greater control in sharing her thoughts and experiences fully (Ellis, Kiesinger, & Tillmann-Healy, 1997; Neuman, 2012; Ramazanoglu, 2002).

Four interviews were conducted with women who have returned to their communities and were held in comfortable locations of their choice: two coffee shops, a public library, and one phone interview. Asking the research participants to choose the location of the interviews was part of an effort to establish trust and respect, and to ensure an environment in which they felt relaxed and best able to share their experiences. The interview lengths ranged from just under one hour to over two hours, depending on the participant's available time and eagerness to share.

Two interviews were conducted with former participants of the Mother-Child Read Aloud Program who were still serving time at Nova Institution for Women. Responding to the procedural requirements of the institution, these interviews took place privately, but in a room with a one-way mirror to ensure supervision by prison staff. One interview was just under two hours and the other was a half hour, cut short because of an unexpected event requiring the participant's attendance.

To establish a connection with the mothers participating in this research and to mitigate some of the power imbalance between the researcher and the researched, I identified myself as a mother upon introduction and revealed some details of my life as a woman, mother, community member, and researcher throughout the interview. Active, engaged listening, elicitation of stories, and use of “how” questions facilitated the exploration of potentially difficult subjects and memories (Hollway & Jefferson, 2000).

All the interviews were recorded with permission from participants. This preserved an accurate, precise, and detailed account of the interview while giving me the freedom to focus on developing rapport. Building rapport and demonstrating respect and empathy created an atmosphere of trust in which the women could share more meaningful accounts of their experiences (Brooks, & Hesse-Biber, 2007; Neuman, 2012). Recordings of the interviews were manually transcribed verbatim, including pauses and non-verbal utterances. I listened to each complete interview recording twice to better ensure accuracy in transcription and better familiarize myself with the data.

To look more closely at the outcomes of the Mother-Child Read Aloud Program for families of incarcerated women, I reviewed the full set of 94 letters sent by children and caregivers to E Fry SJ. I was given the original copies of the letters to review privately in an office at E Fry SJ. I transcribed the letters, excluding all names and other identifying information.

3.3 DATA ANALYSIS

Qualitative content analysis was used to examine and extract meaning from the interview and letter transcripts. I examined the data for repeating or similar words, phrases, and topics and began to classify and categorize these as themes. I reviewed the data again to saturate those categories, and determine the connections between them and relationships with underlying social relations and systems (Leedy & Ormrod, 2016; Comack, 1999).

To ensure the research was grounded in the women's (and their children's and the children's caregivers') lived experiences, to most accurately represent the data, and to allow for the emergence of inconsistent or unanticipated themes, I chose a feminist lens and an inductive approach for analysis. That is, I considered the program participants to be the knowledge holders and generated explanations and theories only after the observation of patterns in the data they provided (Berg, 2009). No specific hypotheses or theoretical model was selected from the literature before conducting the interviews, reading the letters, or analyzing the data. Keeping the research questions in mind, I coded the data thematically to highlight similarities, differences, and patterns within and across the interviews and letters (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). The themes were reviewed with my supervisors and further refined.

3.4 ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

Ethics approval for this research study was secured from Dalhousie University's Social Sciences & Humanities Research Ethics Board and by Correctional Service Canada (see Appendix A and Appendix B).

Various ethical issues arose from this research largely because of the vulnerable population being studied. A larger discussion on how the measures in place to protect vulnerable populations can serve to further marginalize them is urgent, but beyond the scope of this study. I nonetheless want to point out that securing ethics for this research study required enormous patience, diligence, and perseverance as I navigated through a process that is out of step and non-responsive to the complexities of qualitative research with socially excluded populations.

I was very clear, in recruitment, with informed consent documents, and during the interviews, that my intent was to respond to the needs of incarcerated women and their families. My research goals were to amplify the voices of incarcerated women and improve efforts to create effective programs that build family literacy and strengthen family relationships.

Incarcerated and formerly incarcerated women were not coerced to participate and all who participated volunteered to sign a letter of informed consent before the interviews were conducted. The script informed the participants of the research purpose and procedures, potential risks and benefits, and confidentiality measures. Upon transcription and reporting of results, all names and other identifying information were removed. All research data was securely stored and only I and my thesis supervisors had access to it.

3.5 LIMITATIONS

As a mother, partner, and active community member with a Master's program to complete, my research study was limited by time. These constraints were further

complicated by my dependence and reliance on partnerships with very busy community and governmental agencies; I wanted to disrupt their daily procedures as little as possible. These agencies serve people with complicated lives; sometimes my research was unavoidably delayed as I waited for responses from them.

This research relied on one case and on the responses from a small number of individual interviews making it difficult to generalize or transfer findings to a broader population (Elman, Gerring, & Mahoney, 2016). Moreover, as the Mother-Child Read Aloud Program ended over two years ago, there were challenges locating research participants. Many former program participants had moved on, both within the community and within the prison. The sample of participants was limited to those who remained in contact with the E Fry SJ or for whom we could find contact information. Additional interviews, focus group discussions, and interviews with the incarcerated women's children, their caregivers, the Read Aloud Program volunteers, E Fry SJ staff, and prison staff would have provided a deeper understanding and more insight into the full impact of the program.

As a feminist researcher interested and committed to participatory action research, I feel a more collaborative research project would have strengthened the results. The validity of research would have been improved if the research participants had an opportunity to review, approve, seek changes, or reject my interpretation and analysis. I was particularly regretful not to do this as incarcerated women have a long history of being misrepresented.

I sought to mitigate some of these limitations and increase the validity of the data analysis by using multiple data sources (interviews and letters), transcribing verbatim, and reviewing with my supervisors to verify themes and conclusions (Stake, 2003). Further, I explicitly searched for instances where the data did not follow the emerging pattern or theme categorization. This included looking for and reporting negative comments about any aspects of the Read Aloud Program or indications the women or children were better served with a more distant relationship (Berg, 2009).

CHAPTER 4. FINDINGS

One of the chapters in asha bandele's book *Something Like Beauty: One Single Mother's Story* is titled "Statistics Don't Tell the Story, the Story Tells the Story." Reading bandele's story, we bear witness to the possibility and power of love amidst the darkest of places. Her story reveals matters left uncovered by numbers. Likewise, numbers, data, and statistics are not enough to uncover and understand the outcomes of the Mother-Child Read Aloud Program. Between 2000 and 2014, 780 women and 2000 children participated in the Mother-Child Read Aloud Program. Over 5000 books were sent to participating families in Nova Scotia, Newfoundland, Prince Edward Island, New Brunswick, Ontario, Manitoba, Saskatchewan, Alberta, British Columbia, Iowa, Indiana, Portugal, and West Indies. Though interesting, these numbers alone cannot explain the significance of the story. To better illuminate how the program supports incarcerated women and their families, this chapter presents some of their stories.

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 revealed it was the process of participation, not the content of the books shared, that was so important to all involved. No one spoke of seeking or using books that contained stories of families affected by incarceration or stories that would contextualize their experiences of mother-child separation. 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. Each of these themes is presented in detail below.

4.1 STRENGTHENED FAMILY BONDS

The central theme that threaded through the interviews and letters was the Mother-Child Read Aloud Program helped incarcerated mothers bond with their children. Repeated throughout was the sentiment that maintaining a meaningful connection between mothers and their children was crucial. One woman explained, "You're reading to your child even when you can't be there. That is amazing. So we can be together but not together." Unprompted, five of the women I spoke with explicitly stated that the program was the best opportunity women inside have to keep their families together. One woman said that connection

is THE thing. Maintaining that connection, you know? I mean reading is important... Even families that aren't wealthy, they try to get books for their kids. I think in general people know how important it is to read to your kids. Over the years, it's been said over and over. Read to your kids. Read to your kids. It has such an impact on their good lives. But the connection is vital for girls on the inside. And, you just know how happy it's making the kids that miss you.

For most of the women I spoke with, reading had been a part of the life they shared with their children before going to prison, and so the program allowed them to retain one of their regular routines. One mother talked about how the program facilitated a welcomed continuation of one facet of her family's life.

It benefits the kids for us too, to keep positive relationships with them. Some of these kids have been through shit so to be able to receive books and recordings from their mom is a solace. And, like I said, returns some normalcy

- Mom always read to me before, mom still reads to me now.

Caregivers, too, wrote of their appreciation for how the program facilitated some consistency and routine in what had become a more chaotic life for many of the children. Perhaps unsurprisingly, Harry Potter played a role.

We were in the midst of doing Harry Potter books when I got arrested. So then what happened was I was in jail for a year before I got bail so he kinda got ahead of me. So then he would come to visit me he would bring the book that I'd miss and we wouldn't talk about it until I'd read it. And, bloody hell the books are long. So every waking hour I wasn't with him, I was reading this damn book so we could talk about it. But it was so good. I still love them.

Three women spoke of how the stories contained within the books provided by the Mother-Child Read Aloud Program served as a springboard for their phone conversations or letters. One woman told me that previous to participating in the program, phone conversations could be difficult, awkward, and exhausting, and they would often end in tears for herself, or her children, or both. She said, "What do I say? What do they say? Our days are too different and I don't know anymore." Talking about the books she'd sent them created a pathway to other conversations. The books provided them a shared familiar space.

As reflected in the literature, many incarcerated women do not have regular contact with their children or families, while some have none at all. Distance, cost, visiting spaces and policies that are not family-friendly, and challenging relationships with the caregivers of their children all contribute to making visits difficult or impossible. One of the women I spoke with said, “And it was better to go on the weekend so you could visit the Saturday and the Sunday so like I said, you have to do the hotel on top of the travel. It adds up. And he was just a little baby so it was a lot.” She only saw her son once while inside. Another woman was eager to show me photos of her child reading the books she had sent home. Struggling to regain her voice she said, “Connections with your kid when you’re in here are hard to come by. Anything to bring you closer is a benefit for sure.” One woman lamented,

I have grandchildren I’ve never seen, never sat in the same room as them. But I also have other children in my life who used to visit me at the other prison, visiting me since they were six months old. I came here five years later. So when I first got here, the very idea that I could do this program, that I could reconnect with these children... It was really, really special for me, to be able to do that.

The mother’s voice appears to be key in establishing and maintaining the bond between her and her children. After receiving the books and recording from his mother, one child wrote that by listening to her voice, “I felt like as if she was close by.” Almost without exception, the letters were filled with references to how the recordings helped the children feel closer to their mothers, and how being able to

“press play and hear her talking to me” repeatedly and at any time, was hugely valued. One woman said, “The best thing for me to say is it’s a chance for the kids to hear your voice, without any background noise, and you know they’re just going to hear your voice reading them a story like you would do when you’re at home.” Another added that being able to make the recordings in a quiet room was key. The prison is noisy and full of what she called ‘inappropriate or upsetting sounds’ that made phone calls and visiting hours disruptive. “Phone calls just don’t work for us. It’s expensive but it’s more the noise. You don’t want the little kids to hear that stuff.” Being able to simulate a quiet, cozy bedtime hour was treasured. Five letters included references to using the recordings to soothe the children to sleep. Two of the women I spoke with had very young children when they participated in the program, and felt strongly that their babies knew them right away because they had been able to hear their voices on the recordings.

I haven’t seen my son walk. I haven’t seen him talk. I have heard little tiny bits on the phone but not often. He calls me mom, he asks for mom, he can point to my picture. This [the Mother-Child Read Aloud Program] lets me maintain that relationship, help him to still know my voice, to tie a book and an audio recording to me and him together.

Among the women I spoke with who remain at Nova Institution for Women, the Mother-Child Read Aloud Program being put on hold was nothing short of devastating.

It was the primary way I connected with my kids, sometimes the only way I could. It's a huge hole in our lives that it's not there. Not just a little hole, a huge hole. I was involved in their lives and then I was gone. How would they even understand that?

In a letter to E Fry SJ, a mother of one of the incarcerated women wrote how her daughter had come to rely on the program and that she herself thrived knowing she had established a "learning bond with her children." She said since the program had ended the "gray cloud is setting in again." Another woman, who read books for nine children in her family, told me about her efforts to have a friend continue to send books to the children. She acknowledged it did not have the same impact, especially because the packages arrived without her handwritten notes and without her voice.

What happened when the program ended is that one of the girls I'd been reading to since she was a baby said, 'Don't you love me anymore?' [interviewee begins to cry] I've no power over that, right? So, that did two things. It made me so really sad that she would go there. But at the same time telling me just how much of an impact that program had on in her life. I would always say at the end of the tape, 'And I love you to the moon and back.' And then I didn't send her books anymore. It just broke my heart. My grandson asked, "Is Grandma sick?" I mean I'm already this 'airy fairy' kind of person and he's not sure how I fit in. But at least he knew me as the one who sent him books. That part was consistent.

It is important to note that my research was focused on the experiences of program participants and their families, not those who developed and delivered the program. From the perspective of participating women and families, the way in which the program ended was abrupt and without enough communication. One woman spoke about how her family blamed her for not sending any more books or recordings; they did not understand it was beyond her control.

4.2 LITERACY AS HIDDEN BONUS

Though maintaining contact and strengthening relationships was central to those who participated in the program, improved literacy and increased love of reading has been recognized as a “hidden bonus.” One mom spoke about how her child was “a slow reader before but he can now read that whole book... he has just read and reread every word.” Another said, “Because I had the Read Aloud program, my kid reads more than I did as a kid.”

Several caregivers wrote that the Mother-Child Read Aloud Program inspired regular reading in their homes as well as the recognition that it is an important family activity. One child wrote about how receiving the books will help her “keep up in a ‘A’ level of reading”. Caregivers noted the program extended the children’s reading repertoire, providing them access to a wider range of books and genres. The children reported enjoyment of popular titles they recognized and books with links to popular culture or their personal experiences like school or making art. In some letters, caregivers remarked that the packages prompted them to be more involved

with literacy-related activities with the children and to reflect further on the children's interests.

Some of the women indicated that before prison, reading was a regular part of their family life. For them, the Mother-Child Read Aloud Program was a way to continue a practice they already valued. "I read to all of them. My older two are big readers and they read to the younger ones. I made sure it was part of their life. Even closed captioning during movies. So this, this made sense to me to make sure it kept happening, the reading." Another said, "I read a lot to the kids, especially when they were little. It calmed them at bedtime. Now it still calms them at bedtime." One talked about how her oldest loves to "run and run" but he loves to "come home to a book." She said, "I really do think reading to them all along made that difference. Some parents don't read to their kids and their kids are not readers. They don't see it modeled."

Many of the women enjoyed deepening their engagement with the books. They talked about changing their voices for different characters, pausing to reflect on what was happening in the story, giving indications of when the pre-reading child should turn the page.

Sometimes I would be reading a book I'd read before and I'd say, 'OH, this is my favourite part!' So there was that kind of exchange in it. And when they were smaller, I used to always go 'Ding!' when it was time to turn the page, right? And I was ridiculous in my voices, you know? When I was the turtle I'd

use that voice, so yeah, I was pretty animated. Then, when the kids were older, they didn't want me to do that anymore. 'Just read the book, would ya.'

Another woman spoke about her efforts to "keep the story going" through writing to her children about the storylines of the book, asking them questions, and "sort of treating it like a good kind of homework." All the women said they would welcome opportunities to be able to engage more directly with their children through the stories. One suggested two copies of the books could be made available, one for the incarcerated mother and the second for her family. Then, phone calls could be arranged where the books could be shared aloud together in real time.

Of the women I interviewed who have returned to their communities, reading remains central in all of their family lives. One woman told me about their growing home library while another said they go to the local public library each week. After leaving Nova, one woman's very first purchase was a bookshelf she found at a yard sale with her dad. She has fixed it up and her kids have filled it with the books she had sent them during the Mother-Child Read Aloud Program.

4.3 IDENTITY

"This lets me be a mom again." Though these exact words belong to one of the women I spoke with, it is a statement nevertheless echoed by each of them. Another said, "A lot of us have been stripped of motherhood. You can't have no contact, no calls. This [the Mother-Child Read Aloud Program] is a slow step to getting back to being a mom." Four of the women I spoke with explicitly mentioned how this program helped them fulfill their sense of responsibility as a mother. One said, "To

have to come to terms that this is my fault, what they're going through. It's been rough. But then there were these beautiful books, sometimes interactive. It was a gift to be able to gift those to them. Do what I should be doing as a mom."

"As a mom, especially as a mom, can you imagine not being able to read to your kid at night?" This was the response of one woman when I asked her to describe for me the Mother-Child Read Aloud Program. She continued.

The only way I can really explain it, there was a girl in jail and I remember she said to me – I never got in to any fights or anything – but we got in to kind of a little argument about something and she said, "Oh, go buy some diapers for your kid." So, kind of like, you can't take your kid in there, right? So with this you feel like you can at least do something for them, something.

All the women discussed the role reading played or could play in the lives of their families. Four spoke about how they believe instilling a love of reading is an invaluable contribution to the life of their children. One said, "There's nothing else you can do to replace this way to be a mom. They curl up in bed with a book and if I was able to contribute in some small way to that then that's enough."

That the books provided by the Mother-Child Read Aloud Program are new has been identified as very important among all the women I've interviewed. One woman said, "It's still the mom in you that wants to be able to get your child the best things so you want to go down there and try to get the best book you can. Then you feel like you're doing something for them still. I know like possessions and real things shouldn't matter but they do. You want to give them something nice."

The Mother-Child Read Aloud Program enabled women to demonstrate their ongoing commitment to their children's lives. Two of the women I spoke with are currently going through court, trying to regain custody of their children. One spoke of her experience in the courtroom.

At least there's a way for me to say, 'look, I was in there, but I was still doing something to make myself better. It doesn't look like abandonment on the child. So they can't sit there and say this person was in jail and hasn't been doing anything. I'm still, you know, being a mom. So that's kind of cool.

4.4 A MOTHER'S DISTAL PRESENCE

The majority of the letters I reviewed indicated the children who received the books were enormously grateful, chiefly because it provided a consistent way for their mothers to be present in their lives. One seven-year old declared, "I think it's the best idea ever thought of." According to the letters, the arrival of the books and recordings was a significant event and viewed with anticipation and excitement. Caregivers of the children wrote about how thrilled the kids were to receive the packages, made out in the children's names, directly from their moms. One caregiver wrote that the packages were a "direct and constant reminder that her mom is still thinking about her, caring for her, still loving her." One of the moms talked about how her daughter initially felt abandoned and how the Mother-Child Read Aloud Program helped them move past that feeling.

It very much helps her know I'm still here. I'm in her life. I'd always say 'I love you, good night.' Toys can't replace the time I'm in here. Having something so

simple as books to ground me and ground her. Sending those books to her she knows I'm saying, 'I'm still here for you.' It's a connection thing.

One of the mothers said, "They don't have a lot to hang on to when we're gone. Kids started to slack in school; it wasn't easy when I was gone." A grandmother wrote about how her grandchildren were often sullen and withdrawn, especially during the first few months their mother was in prison. She reported that when the packages would arrive, the kids would "rip them open and beam for days on end." In one interview, a woman talked about how confused and worried her kids were and how the Mother-Child Read Aloud Program helped to reassure them she was fine.

This helped them know that I'm okay, I sound okay. That I was doing okay.

They knew, the older ones anyway, they knew I was in prison and they were worried. So this way they could hear my voice and they know you haven't forgot what they like. You're thinking about them, you picked out the right books.

Most of the letters are filled with stories of how often the kids read and listen to the books sent by their moms. One caregiver wrote, "That one, she reads over and over and over - I've hidden it up on the fridge." Another wrote that the only thing she would change about the program is supplementing it with extra batteries for the Walkmans, "Every other day I have to put in new ones, they listen so often!" One child reflected that being able to hear her mom's voice on the recording carried her through until their weekly phone calls. Some children have arranged special places in their rooms where they keep the tapes and books. According to the letters, some

children bring the books and recordings to school and proudly share them with their friends. Other children prefer to listen in private, keeping it as something shared between just them and their mom. One mother said, “My daughter is so much more settled now that she can hear my voice.”

Though the letters sent to E Fry SJ by caregivers and children were overwhelmingly positive and filled with gratitude, there were a few exceptions. Two letters indicated that though the children were happy to receive the books, they found it too upsetting to listen to the voices of their mothers. One letter was a request from a caregiver that books and recordings no longer be sent. The letter reported how, upon “putting on her headphones and hearing that mother’s voice”, the child, angry and overcome, became hysterical and destroyed her room. Interestingly, a letter arrived months later from the same home saying they would like to try again, and the caregiver said she had since observed the child listening calmly and intently.

4.5 MAKING ROOM FOR RELATIONSHIPS

Both the interviews and letters revealed that 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. It also contributed to relationship-building in the wider community.

Many of the mothers spoke about how their relationships with those looking after their children are sometimes strained. One woman summed this up by stating,

“You have to play by the rules – all of a sudden even the parenting rules – of someone else.” Another spoke of how the cut to the program strained her relationship with her child’s father once again.

My relationship with her father was not so great so it [the Mother-Child Read Aloud Program] helped. Kind of pissed him off when I stopped, he didn’t understand why I stopped sending the books, didn’t believe it wasn’t my fault. People on the outside don’t understand.” One woman spoke about how the caregiver of her children initially denied her any contact with them. This program, she believes, “softened her heart a little”.

Caregivers consistently wrote about how they treasured the program, not only for what it provided the children, but also for how it reminded them of the mother’s love and dedication. One person wrote about how, once the kids were at school or in bed, she would take out the recordings and listen to them. Another wrote about how they were enjoyed by the whole family, children and grandparents, and how the recordings and books helped them feel closer to the incarcerated mom. One of the women spoke about how the program inspired her and her husband to start a book club for just the two of them. “He’s out there in a big ol’ house by himself and I’m in here in a big ol’ house with a thousand other people. Too much difference in our lives now. This way, talking about the books. We’re connected.”

Participating in the program also inspired women to share with one another tips and strategies for how to best read with their children. One woman said, “Like I was really interested – I would ask all the time, like what do you do if it’s a novel,

what kind of things do you talk about? It would be good to chat and get ideas with one another.” When I asked how they would change or improve the program, four women said they would welcome the opportunity to learn more together, as a group. Taking part in the program also allowed the women to demonstrate their support to one another.

Sometimes a mom would say, “Aw, I just can’t do it today” and I’d say “Yes you can. You need to and you’re coming with me now.” It felt too hard for her, too emotional. But I’d say, “Your son needs to hear from you.” And I would drag people down. And they would go. And they would always be so happy after they did it, right? You just gotta push through because it’s worth it.”

Another delighted in telling me about “a real curmudgeon.” She said this woman was silent, angry, and uncommunicative most of the time but how participating in the program would transform her. She said, “We would all watch. When you saw her reading the books, her whole face just lit up. It glowed. She’d soar. You knew this was special. She never missed a session and we tried never to miss her doing it.”

One of the incarcerated women I spoke with read to many different children through the Mother-Child Read Aloud Program. Before entering prison, she played a mentoring role in the lives of several women. Participating in the Mother-Child Read Aloud Program allowed her to continue connecting with those women by reading to their children, demonstrating to them the important role reading plays in children’s lives. She lamented that now that the program has been put on hold, she sends fewer cards and letters as well. “I think it’s because I don’t have that reminder where every

two or three months I'm reading so better get that letter going too. Because sometimes when you're in here you don't want to think about time."

Half of the women indicated participation in the Mother-Child Read Aloud Program was "something people on the outside can relate to" and reminds community members that they are mothers too. One woman said, "I think people think of Nova as a bunch of bad people from NS. These girls, there's a lot from Newfoundland, New Brunswick, out West, people who aren't getting phone calls or visits... You know, this is the one thing some of these girls can do for their kid and people get that. They just get it." Four caregivers wrote that the Mother-Child Read Aloud Program gave them something tangible and relatable to speak about when they talked about their family member's incarceration.

One story shared with me revealed how the Mother-Child Read Aloud Program had an impact beyond the immediate family.

One of our books that I sent to our grandson is a book that was written in English and in Cree. It was about a grandfather teaching his grandchild about his culture. The top half was in English and the bottom half was in Cree and there'd be a full picture. He took it to school for a show and tell kind of thing 'cause he thought that some of the boys in his class that were Cree might want to read it. What happened was, the book went home with one of the boys whose grandad read it to him. Then the book came back with a letter, um 'Could I come into the class and read the book in Cree to the other children?' So that's what they did. [pause] I never expected that, didn't know it would

have that effect. My grandson was just so thrilled that he shared the book with his class and then it got turned in to this big thing. He says “It’s a big book now.” I think that means it’s a big hit. It’s so special to know that happened – it had a bigger teaching moment for that whole community. I was just crying about the whole thing... I’ve never met my grandson. We don’t live down the block from one another. I’m blessed to be part of his life in whatever small measure I can be.

This story demonstrates the Mother-Child Read Aloud Program’s capacity to build relationships within the greater community and to make meaningful links between people from different backgrounds and cultures.

4.6 COPING MECHANISM

All the women I interviewed talked 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. One woman said it was rougher toward the end of her time in prison, that tension and pressure had built. Participating in the Mother-Child Read Aloud Program reminded her, “My son. No drama. Do my time and get back to him.”

Two women mentioned how reading is a way to find refuge, especially in a busy, technology-filled world.

Books are important to me. And it carves a special place in the lives of the kids who get the books because they're not watching TV, they're not playing games on their screen or whatever, it's just actual conversational kind of reading. You can keep your kid running 24/7 and people do. Sometimes they gotta, sometimes they just do and those kids are stressing out.

A second woman echoed this sentiment when speaking with the caregiver of her children, "I said to her you're out every night with them, kickboxing, swimming, soccer, scouts – when do you have kick-back time and she said, 'When we read your books'". When talking about how her kids could sometimes use books to escape or go to a different world, she recalled her own experience.

When I was growing up and my life was real turbulent, I would go to the library and I would stay there every opening hour and I read hundreds of books. Whenever they [her parents] would be doing whatever they were doing which was unpleasant I would just go into my room and do the book. I think books are the best self-care you can do for yourself.

One of the women reflected the program was a steady influence on everyone.

Any chance for the girls to all get together and talk about something that is not... You know there's lots of programs you take in there and you're talking about your life, your whole life, not just your crime. You have a whole bunch of experiences. It's a lot on your brain. It's hard. So, to give them something to take their mind off what they did wrong and who you hurt and who you

disappointed. Takes your mind away. For people to understand that this kind of read aloud program makes me and the kids really happy and excited – all the girls and all their kids. Even when they do come visit, it's not quiet. It's really noisy and just not cozy at all. So this program is special. Real special.

Upon hearing the program was on hold, one of the women who had returned to her community expressed her shock, hurt, and anger. It is her opinion that the removal of the program – and therefore the removal of an opportunity for the women to stay connected to their children – will contribute to more attempted suicides, especially among the women who are imprisoned far from home. She said, “Going to prison, that’s your punishment. When you’re in there, you don’t need to be punished more... Girls that are sad already are just going to be sadder and who is that going to help?”

4.7 KEY PROGRAM COMPONENTS

The experiences and perspectives shared by participants of the Mother-Child Read Aloud Program begin to answer this study’s second research question: what key components of the Mother-Child Read Aloud Program promote family connection, encourage love of reading, foster positive identity, and facilitate family re-entry? As evidenced in these findings and discussed further in the next chapter, several program components were crucial: consistency in program delivery; choice in selection of book titles that are new, inclusive, and popular; a quiet space in which to record; simulation of the traditional bedtime routine; the audio-recordings themselves; interaction with other participants; and packages made to look as if the mother sent them directly.

CHAPTER 5. DISCUSSION

You can put it another way, of course; you always can.

-Julian Barnes, *The Sense of an Ending*

In this chapter, I will put it one way, though of course I could have put it another way. I will put it the way in which I interpret the research findings through a feminist lens and girded by relational, ecological systems, and family resilience theory. I will put it the way that contributes to an understanding of how the Mother-Child Read Aloud Program can strengthen relationships, nurture positive self-identity, contribute to a love of reading, and mediate individual, relational, and social processes that foster resilience in incarcerated mothers and their families. Outlined below is a fuller discussion of these findings and the implications for theory, practice, and future research.

5.1 IMPLICATIONS FOR THEORY

The research findings described in this report affirm the literature on relational cultural theory, attachment theory, ecological systems theory, and resilience science that underscore the primacy 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, the Mother-

Child Read Aloud Program served as a tool for ameliorating the effects of this separation.

5.1.1 RELATIONAL CULTURAL THEORY

For the women I spoke with, incarceration was (and for some, remains) a severe impediment to maintaining or developing growth-fostering relationships (Miller, 1976; Comstock, 2005; Covington, 2007). As a result of their incarceration, most reported feelings of shame, distress, isolation, and desperation to resume the role of mother. By participating in the Mother-Child Read Aloud Program, women were able to overcome some of these feelings by moving toward a deeper connection with their children, their families, their fellow inmates, and the wider community. These deeper connections created the opportunity for incarcerated women to feel “five good things” (Miller, 1986): a greater joy and energy; more competence; a more authentic sense of self; improved self-worth; deeper connection to others.

Through sending their children books and recordings, women were able to reconstruct their identity as competent mothers, finding greater peace with themselves (Canadian Association of the Elizabeth Fry Societies; 2013; Arditti, 2014). Participation appeared to help women manage their feelings of guilt and shame and reclaim the role of provider and mother (Arditti, 2014; Hartling, Rosen, Walker, & Jordan, 2000, Barnes & Stringer, 2013). As one mother described it, participation enabled her to “Do what I should be doing as a mom.” Learning and practicing how to animate the stories and communicate more effectively with their children about the stories helped to inspire renewed confidence and self-worth. This finding supports

previous research suggesting reading with children deepens parental confidence (Seden, 2008; Blumberg & Griffin, 2013). Contributing to the children's literacy practices was a way to reestablish the parent-child dynamic and helped the mothers regain a sense of purpose and pride (Blumberg & Griffin, 2013).

The findings of this study are consistent with research revealing that building a stronger connection with their children serves as a steady beacon for participating children and their mothers (Arditti, 2014; Barnes & Stringer, 2013; Covington, 2002, Duncan, 2011). Listening to the recorded voice of their mothers reading to them helped the children feel closer to them and served as a "direct and constant reminder that her mom is still thinking about her, caring for her, still loving her." One mother said, "My daughter is so much more settled now that she can hear my voice." Likewise, participation provided a focus for the women and helped them concentrate on their reintegration efforts. One woman aptly described it, "My son. No drama. Do my time and get back to him." Nearly all participating women and their families remarked on how the quiet, intimate nature of the recordings were key in establishing this meaningful connection: one child writing, "I felt as if she was close by."

The Mother-Child Read Aloud Program appears to facilitate a person's ability to "establish, nurture, and share in empathetic, growth-fostering relationships" within, but also beyond, the immediate family (Miller, 1976; Comstock, 2005). By demonstrating their commitment to mothering through sending the books and recordings, some women were able to improve fractured interpersonal relationships

with the caregivers of their children and other family members. Family members expressed appreciation for the women's dedication to remaining present in their children's lives and many of them listened to the recordings for their own fulfillment. Some mothers and caregivers also reported the Mother-Child Read Aloud Program made the experience of incarceration more relatable to the outside community and garnered them greater support and empathy.

5.1.2 AN INTEGRATION OF BOWLBY'S ATTACHMENT THEORY AND BRONFENBRENNER'S ECOLOGICAL SYSTEMS MODEL

This study corroborates the literature asserting that maternal incarceration threatens the attachment bond between mothers and their children, placing the children at greater risk of anxiety, anger, depression, desolation, and behavioural problems (Bowlby, 1982; Murray & Murray, 2010). Mothers, caregivers, and the children themselves discussed the distress and struggles they had in being separated from their mothers. As mentioned earlier, participation in the program helped many mothers and children have meaningful contact and feel closer. It served to protect their secure attachment. This finding corroborates previous research that suggests reading together promotes a strong relationship and secure attachment (Bus, 2001). As one mother declared, "You're reading to your child even when you can't be there. That is amazing. So we can be together but not together." Though incarcerated mothers and their children could most often not be together physically, the engaged communication facilitated by the program enabled them to be together emotionally. and through engaged communication.

Factors within multiple, interdependent systems influence whether and how incarcerated mothers can maintain a secure attachment with their children (Holmes, Belmonte, Wentworth, & Tillman, 2010). That is, the quality of a mother-child bond is contextually dependent. This study revealed participation in the Mother-Child Read Aloud Program can facilitate a stronger bond by mediating factors within the interrelated micro-, exo-, meso-, and macro- systems that affect the quality of contact between an incarcerated mother and her child. Table 1 below provides a summary.

Table 1.

Impact on Ecological Systems Affecting Mother-Child Contact

Ecological System Affecting Quality of Mother-Child Contact	Outcome of Mother-Child Read Aloud Program
Microsystem: mother-child attachment, caregiver-child relationship	Receipt of packages reduced children’s sense of isolation, made them feel closer to their mother, and inspired more shared literacy activities within the home.
Mesosystem: mother-caregiver relationship	Demonstration of ongoing commitment by the mother eased some mother-caregiver relationships.
Exosystem: health and support network of mother and caregiver, prison policies and practices	Being able to play role of competent mother and provider improved many women’s sense of self-worth and positive identity.
Macrosystem: societal attitudes about incarceration, socioeconomic disparities in incarceration rates	Participation in the program elicited greater community empathy towards mothers and families

Participation in the Mother-Child Read Aloud Program influenced important factors within the microsystem. Children and their caregivers reported that receiving the books and recordings from mothers eased some children's sense of disconnection and isolation. Reading the books and listening to the recordings provided a consistent, intimate way to stay connected with their mother. As one woman said, "Sending those books to her she knows I'm saying, 'I'm still here for you.' It's a connection thing." Sharing the packages also offered a new opportunity to build a relationship with their caregiver, as several caregivers wrote about how the program inspired more shared literacy activities within the home. According to the letters, some children brought the books and recordings to school to proudly share them with their friends. This suggests that for some children, receiving and sharing the books had a positive impact on their self-esteem and self-confidence.

Factors within some children's mesosystems and exosystems were positively influenced by participation in the Mother-Child Read Aloud Program. Some families reported that the mothers' demonstration of their ongoing commitment to their children through sending the books and recordings eased the relationship between the mother and the caregiver, an important consideration within the mesosystem. Research has established positive mother-caregiver relationships are linked to healthier child development (Poehlmann, Shlafer, Maes, & Hanneman, 2008; Christian, 2009; Cunningham & Baker, 2003; Dallaire, 2007). Participating mothers described a stronger sense of self-worth, positive identity, and diminished stress, influencing a key component of the child's exosystem. When talking about being able to select and send beautiful books to her children, one woman said, "It was a gift to

be able to gift those to them. Do what I should be doing as a mom.” This supports previous research demonstrating shared reading programs provide a meaningful opportunity for mothers to play a significant role in their children’s lives and then view and present themselves in the role of caring mother, not just prisoner (Kerka, 1995; Loring, 2012; Muth, 2006; Walden, 2004).

Within the macrosystem, both mothers and caregivers discussed the program’s potential for eliciting societal empathy and for prompting greater public interest in understanding the complex, cumulative, and interrelated oppression, discrimination, and marginalization experienced by incarcerated women. As mentioned previously, some mothers and caregivers reported participation in the Mother-Child Read Aloud Program garnered them greater support and empathy within their communities. Women seeking to regain custody of their children have also used participation in the program to effectively demonstrate to the courts their ongoing commitment to their children’s lives. As one woman stated, “At least there’s a way for me to say look, I was in there, but I was still doing something to make myself better.”

5.1.3 RESILIENCE

Resilience, as understood within this study, is the process of positive adaptation in the face of adversity, trauma, or significant stress. Findings from this study suggest that, whether directly or indirectly, participation in the Mother-Child Read Aloud Program contributes to key factors that promote resilience.

Through choosing, reading, and sharing the books, participation in the program allows women to be active agents in mothering their children. Having control over which books to read and share, being able to send new books, using their own voices to record the stories, and having a quiet environment in which to record were key components to increasing women's sense of empowerment. Establishing greater power or control over one's environment and relationships fosters resilience (Ungar, 2010). All the women shared that being involved with the program gave them a greater sense of control and an active opportunity to be a mom again. One woman indicated this contributed to her resolve to do her time "with no fuss" and return to her child. She said, "It's still the mom in you that wants to be able to get your child the best things so you want to go down there and try to get the best book you can. Then you feel like you're doing something for them still."

This study reveals the capacity of the Mother-Child Read Aloud Program to contribute to additional key factors that promote resilience within families affected by maternal incarceration. Previous research has demonstrated an opportunity to realign functional roles of motherhood, maintenance of interpersonal relationships, increased access to community empathy and support, and improved literacy skills and practice all foster family resilience (VanderStaay, 2006; Murray & Murray, 2010; Poehlmann, Dallaire, Loper, & Shear, 2010; Walsh, 2016). All the women talked about how influencing their children's literacy practices helped them regain a sense of maternal identity, purpose, and pride. Participation facilitated stronger mother-child relationships, mother-caregiver relationships, and child-caregiver relationships, and supported greater empathy among family and community

members. Incarcerated women and their families reported an increased joy and frequency of reading and more engagement with literacy-related activities. Through participation in the Mother-Child Read Aloud Program, children can connect books with the reassuring sound of their mother's voice, building a potentially lifelong, positive association with reading (Demack & Stephens, 2013; Cunningham & Zilbulsky, 2010). This strengthened resilience, nurtured through participation in the Mother-Child Read Aloud Program, can prepare children to better integrate into society and their mothers to better reintegrate into society.

In 2014, Masten contended resilience is a likely outcome if normative systems like strong family relationships and effective parenting are maintained during adversity. This study suggests participation in the Mother-Child Read Aloud Program enabled these normative systems to remain strong. In addition to facilitating meaningful mother-child contact, improved family relationships, and an active role as a parent, many families spoke of how participation in the program allowed them to retain some sense of family normalcy. They stated this better equipped them to cope during separation. In speaking on how the program helped them carry on their previous bedtime routine, one woman said, "to be able to receive books and recordings from their mom is a solace. And, like I said, returns some normalcy - Mom always read to me before, mom still reads to me now."

This study supports the growing body of research that describes resilience as a dynamic, systemic process that shifts with changing risk and protective factors (Ungar, 2011; Masten & Cicchetti, 2016). As demonstrated earlier, participation in

the Mother-Child Read Aloud Program improved important factors within multiple systems, and thus increased the family's capacity to adapt and grow (Ungar, Ghazinour, & Richter, 2013). This capacity for resilience shifted with the loss of the Mother-Child Read Aloud Program. Families reported the loss as "a huge hole in our lives" and deeply damaging to their sense of connection, control, identity, and purpose. The shifting nature of resilience is further demonstrated by one child's gradual eagerness to participate in the program. While listening to her mother's voice initially made her incredibly distraught, over time, she picked up the recordings and books. This suggests having control over how and when to participate in the program is important.

Having presented this study's theoretical implications, I now explore the finding's implications for practice. For families experiencing incarceration, it is imperative that theory derived from this and other relevant studies be used to inform effective, meaningful practice.

5.2 IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE

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. As described in this report's findings, participating women and their families revealed several relational and material components of the program that were key to its success. Drawn from a review of the literature and the findings of this study, I put forward several suggestions and

recommendations for community-based and prison-based organizations interested in designing, delivering, and sustaining a shared reading program for incarcerated women and their families. Like Finlay (2014), I first and foremost encourage the institutions that do not currently offer such a program to prioritize doing so.

- Explore partnerships with prison libraries, public libraries, community organizations, schools and school boards, and provincial or national initiatives to increase the program's capacity, secure financial and technical support, engage more volunteers, and promote the work.
- Promote the program to the wider community to mobilize support, understanding, and empathy.
- Communicate the value of shared reading programs to prison staff. Highlight how the program helps to strengthen family bonds, promote positive self-worth, foster family resiliency, and develop literacy skills, and how this eases family and community reintegration.
- Ensure the program is held consistently (minimally four times a year) to ensure regular, adequate contact between the reader and read-to.
- To further extend the benefits of shared reading, consider the inclusion of participatory, interactive workshops (including group discussions, role play, demonstrations, journal writing, visits from children's book authors and illustrators) that are responsive to participants' personal experiences, needs, and interests. Topics could include the benefits of shared reading, the role of a parent in developing children's literacy skills, tips and strategies for effective shared reading (focusing on interactive reading, linking text to personal

experiences or other texts, making predictions, creating book-related activities), and child psychology concepts. Program participants should be included in the evaluation of the workshops to identify what they have learned, their challenges and suggestions, and the impact on their lives or those of their children.

- Ensure the collection of books from which women can select is new or appears new and contains multiple copies of a wide range of genres for a variety of ages and is inclusive and multi-lingual. Encourage mothers to make recommendations for book purchases based on old favourites, children's interests etc.
- Make certain that women have a quiet, private space in which to read.
- Develop a team of enthusiastic, committed volunteers or staff. Train volunteers or staff to be familiar with adult education principles, and to be able to assist mothers with the selection of appropriate titles and engaging ways to read and share the books.
- To increase women's sense of agency and self-worth, encourage past or regular participants of the program to volunteer and assist in the delivery of the program.
- To supplement the program and enable deeper literacy benefits, two copies of each book could be made available, one for the mother (which could be available for all in the prison library or visiting room) and one sent to the child. Special phone calls could be arranged where the books could be read aloud together and discussed.

- To strengthen the confidence and capacity of caregivers to enhance the learning and engagement potential of the books, develop appropriate materials to be included with the packages of books and recordings. These could include a public library card and membership information, information about the benefits of shared reading, book-lists, language games and literacy activities, and links to relevant websites.

5.3 IMPLICATIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

This qualitative case study was exploratory and made clear the need for further, more extensive, longitudinal research to determine the outcomes of shared reading programs for incarcerated women and their children. Further research is necessary for designing programs that can meaningfully maintain and strengthen family relationships, instill a love of reading, foster family resilience, and better prepare women for successful family and community re-entry.

Though challenging to conduct with such vulnerable populations, longitudinal studies that explore the long-term effects of shared reading programs on family resilience, family literacy, life-long love of reading, and recidivism rates are urgently needed. Future longitudinal research should include a focus on the perspectives and experiences of children as well, assessing the outcomes of their participation in shared reading programs.

Carefully designed, comparative research (between different shared reading programs as well as between individuals who participate in shared reading programs and those who do not), with larger samples and rigorous measurement, that

examines the short-term and long-term outcomes of shared reading programs should be a priority. This would require control groups and the careful development and testing of appropriate, meaningful measurement tools. It is my belief that qualitative research, eliciting the voices of program participants, will always be an important component of this research.

Findings from this study revealed the important role caregivers play in the lives of incarcerated mothers and their children. Further examining their role in influencing the quality of contact between the incarcerated mother and her children as well as in mediating the outcomes of a shared reading program is an important consideration for future research.

CHAPTER 6. 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. Though additional larger-scale, longitudinal, comparative research is warranted, this study, grounded in the voices of program participants, reveals the important outcomes of participation in the Mother-Child Read Aloud Program: 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.

It is not enough, however, to advocate that these programs be made available to all incarcerated women. It is not enough to broaden an understanding of the systemic, complex pathways to crime. It is not enough to give voice to those experiencing incarceration. The Mother-Child Read Aloud Program is not a solution; it is a response to the crisis of the growing number of incarcerated women. Providing a shared reading program must be accompanied by work to reshape the intersecting social, economic, political, gender, and racial forces that criminalize women.

Applauding the strengthened resilience made possible by the Mother-Child Read Aloud Program must not take the focus off examining and resisting the social inequities that create the need for resilience in the first place.

The women behind Canadian prison bars are not nameless offenders. They are our community members. They are most often beloved family members whose presence - and absence - matters. The Mother-Child Read Aloud Program can ease this profound absence. As one woman said to me, "Being able to read to my kid through the Read Aloud Program was crucial to staying sane. I would have done it every day."

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**APPENDIX A: LETTERS OF ETHICS APPROVAL FROM DALHOUSIE UNIVERSITY'S
SOCIAL SCIENCES & HUMANITIES RESEARCH ETHICS BOARD**

Social Sciences & Humanities Research Ethics Board
Letter of Approval

November 30, 2016

Alison Brown
Management\Information Management

Dear Alison,

REB #: 2016-3996
Project Title: Portrait of the Incarcerated Woman as a Reading Mother:
Revealing the Impact of a Shared Reading Program

Effective Date: November 30, 2016
Expiry Date: November 30, 2017

The Social Sciences & Humanities Research Ethics Board has reviewed your application for research involving humans and found the proposed research to be in accordance with the Tri-Council Policy Statement on *Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans*. This approval will be in effect for 12 months as indicated above. This approval is subject to the conditions listed below which constitute your on-going responsibilities with respect to the ethical conduct of this research.

Sincerely,

Dr. Karen Beazley, Chair

Social Sciences & Humanities Research Ethics Board
Amendment Approval

April 06, 2017

Alison Brown
Management\Information Management

Dear Alison,

REB #: 2016-3996

Project Title: Portrait of the Incarcerated Woman as a Reading Mother: Revealing
the Impact of a Shared Reading Program

The Social Sciences & Humanities Research Ethics Board has reviewed your
amendment request and has approved this amendment request effective today, April
06, 2017.

Sincerely,

Dr. Karen Beazley, Chair

**APPENDIX B: LETTER OF ETHICS APPROVAL FROM CORRECTIONAL SERVICE
CANADA**



Correctional Service Canada Service correctionnel
Canada

Date: 2017-07-12
Approved as of: 2017-06-06

Ms. Alison Brown
1324 Hollis Street Halifax, NS
B3J 1T9

Dear Ms. Brown:

The Research Branch of the Correctional Service of Canada (CSC) has reviewed the proposal "***Portrait of the Incarcerated Women as a Reading Mother: Revealing the Impact of a Shared Reading Program***". We are pleased to inform you that your study has been *approved*.

Approval for the conduct of this study is valid for a 2 year period after which time a new submission will be required. Please see the Commissioner 's Directive on Research CD009 for all policy and guidelines relating to the conduct of research involving CSC.

As outlined in the Application and Undertaking form, we look forward to receiving the final report of the study in advance of publication and public dissemination.

We wish you well on the continuation of your research.

Sincerely,

John Weekes, PhD A/Director ,Research Branch
Correctional Service of Canada, Government of Canada
john .weekes@c sc-scc.gc.ca / Tel:613-943-5065

APPENDIX C: INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

Please note interviews were one-to-one and open-ended. Because of this, the exact wording may have changed a little. Sometimes I used other short follow-up questions for clarification or for further detail. Additionally, some of these questions were answered without prompting.

Thanks so much for agreeing to this interview today. I'm so pleased that you're happy to share your ideas about reading with your children and your experiences with the Mother-Child Read Aloud program. Before we begin, I would like to review the letter of informed consent. **[Review the research aims, procedures, potential risks and benefits, and confidentiality of the consent form, address any concerns and ensure agreement and signature before beginning.]**

1. Let's start by talking about your early reading experiences. Was reading part of your life, growing up? [Follow up, if necessary: Did your parents read to you or encourage you to read? Do you remember a favourite book or a book that made a big impression on you?]
2. How do you view yourself as a reader now? [Do you like to read? What do you get out of reading?]
3. Tell me a little about your kids.
4. Before coming to Nova, did you read with your kids? [What did you enjoy about reading with your kids? Were there any challenges you faced in trying to read to your kids? Do your kids seem to enjoy reading books – on their own or with others?]
5. How would you describe the Mother-Child Read Aloud program to someone who didn't know anything about it?
6. What would you say are the best things about Read Aloud?
7. In addition to reading the story aloud, did you include other things in the recordings for your kids? [Do you talk about the story or send messages?]

8. How do you think your kids felt about receiving the recordings and the books?
9. Did participating in Read Aloud have any effect on your relationship with your kids? [How?]
10. [For those still at Nova...] If given the chance, would you participate in the program again? Why or why not?
11. [For those back in their communities] Did participating in Read Aloud influence your reading experiences with your kids once you returned to your family?
12. Has the way you think about yourself as a mother or reader changed since participating in Read Aloud?
13. If you were designing or developing the program, what would you change or include? [If necessary, prompt with examples from other programs: learning opportunities to build literacy and parenting skills, sessions about how parents can support children's reading, writing workshops etc.]
14. Do you think reading with children is important? [Why or why not? How do you think reading together as a family can help or make things better in people's lives?]
15. Is there anything else you would like to tell me about reading with your kids or the role that the Mother-Child Read Aloud program played in your life?