

Supporting Children of Incarcerated Parents and their Families with Children's Storybooks
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Children of incarcerated parents (CIP) are a vulnerable, unacknowledged, and hidden population who often suffer long-term consequences, such as mental illness and homelessness, due to their parent's imprisonment. Accurate numbers of how many children are affected by their parent's incarceration are currently not available, but a 2011 to 2012 estimate approximated 9,000 D.C. children experiencing parental incarceration. Parental incarceration is particularly impactful in the US capital as the District of Columbia has the highest rates of incarceration in the United States. Furthermore, most people who are convicted of felonies in D.C. serve their sentences in federal prisons all over the country. My extensive research has shown that incarcerated parents (IP) are the best means for voluntary and confidential identification of these children to facilitate support. By working with IP as well as their children and caregivers, a holistic and sensitive approach can be taken that will have long-term positive impacts for CIP. After completing academic research about CIP and the challenges that they face in the District, I have become extremely passionate about working with community partners who work to address these issues and to expand their missions through this project. I have worked directly with incarcerated parents in the District, engaged in facilitating the practice of bibliotherapy, and become a Board Advisor for DC Project Connect. This project is a culmination of academic and service-based research from both myself and Free Minds Book Club and Writing Workshop, that seeks to support a vastly hidden population.

This project will address the social issues of invisibility and stigma that CIP face through the distribution of children's books that specifically address various themes of parental incarceration. By working with my community partner, Free Minds Book Club, and GW student volunteers, children's books that address themes of parental incarceration will be offered and distributed to parents who are incarcerated in the Federal Bureau of Prisons (BOP). Free Minds Book Club will highlight the storybooks in their monthly newsletter, *Connect Magazine*, which is sent to over 600 incarcerated members across the country. Incarcerated parents will be able to request which book they want, and the book will be sent to them from an authorized sender, Amazon. There will be three different books offered to IP in the BOP, "Kofi's Mom" by Richard Dyches (ages 3-6), "Visiting Day" by Jacqueline Woodson (ages 5-9), and "Ruby on the Outside" by Nora Raleigh Baskin (ages 10 and up). By utilizing books that are targeted at children of different ages, children will be able to better comprehend the concept of incarceration and will promote healing through literature.

Additionally, IP will receive resources to guide them on how to use these books (e.g., insight regarding children's understanding and perspectives, reading circles, communication between incarcerated and non-incarcerated family members). With an understanding of the role of using children's books to carry out bibliotherapeutic techniques, which is using literature to promote healing, the IP will then be invited to have the same book sent to their child and his/her caregiver, with resources appropriate for the children outside prison, and those looking after them. If IP want to send the book to their children and his/her caregiver, I will ask the IP for the contact information of the child and caregiver to get permission from the caregiver first. If permission is give, children will receive supplementary materials such as pencils, crayons, paper, and envelopes so that children can write letters to their incarcerated parents if they choose. This facilitates increased and voluntary communication between children and their incarcerated parents. By offering support through literature and supplementary pamphlets of information, the uncertainty and stigma surrounding parental incarceration will be addressed and hopefully, reduced.

The idea for this project began in my Sociology of Law class in the spring of 2020. The research project for the course was to identify a socio-legal issue of concern to me and propose the best method to change the issue at stake. I chose to address children of incarcerated parents in Washington, DC. From that project, I decided to look further into how to serve the needs of CIP through a service-based project. I began partnerships with two nonprofits, DC Project Connect and Free Minds Book Club & Writing Workshop and discovered the importance of literature in healing. Through my independent research, my work with my mentor, Dr. Fran Buntman, and my partnerships, I decided that offering to send books explaining parental incarceration to incarcerated parents in the federal Bureau of Prisons and their children would be a voluntary and impactful way to support a vastly hidden population.

The issues that my project addresses in relation to peacebuilding, conflict resolution, and reconciliation regard the damage that incarceration causes in various family aspects. The roots of the issue of parental incarceration and the damage it causes is the stigmatization associated with incarceration, the lack of understanding, and the lack of communication about incarceration. My project focuses on building peace within the family structure and the community by facilitating the building of positive relationships and fostering reconciliation. Incarceration not only harms the individual's life and well-being, but also their families. Children lose their mothers and fathers due to incarceration and a huge strain is put on their relationship. Visitation and communication between an incarcerated parent and child is incredibly difficult. A large strain is also put on caregivers as they are left to raise and support the children and it may be their responsibility to explain where their parents have gone. This is an extremely difficult task, and these children's books provide a means for caregivers to explain parental incarceration in a way children can comprehend.

Through this project, I address the relationship between CIP and their incarcerated parents by offering the opportunity for voluntary communication through children's books. This can foster a positive relationship and strengthen the parent-child bond through applied bibliotherapy which will promote the healing process. Bibliotherapy can also empower children and teach them that it is possible for them to overcome the challenges that they face. These books provide a means for incarcerated parents and their children to connect and communicate despite their separation. Bibliotherapy helps children understand their parent's incarceration in an emotionally safe space. Books are a space where children can explore their emotions without any stigma. It has also been shown that increased contact with family members during incarceration can lead to decreased family conflict. Not only will facilitated communication benefit the well-being of CIP but will benefit the family structure. This will begin the road to reconciliation between parent and child once the IP is released.

Conflict resolution and prevention will also be addressed as children of incarcerated parents often suffer from various consequences such as psychological strain, antisocial behavior, suspension or expulsion from school, economic hardship, and criminal activity. It has been found that CIP often have higher risks of engaging in delinquent behavior due to the challenges they face. These risk factors, however, can be mitigated by strengthening the parent-child bond. As Fredrick Douglas said, "It is easier to build strong children than to repair broken men". This project will work to strengthen and repair relationships between CIP and IP to prevent future conflict both within the family and within the community. Additionally, a part of this project is to provide incarcerated parents, CIP, and their caregivers additional resources that can help guide them through the stages of the healing process.

The IP and caregivers will be surveyed for evaluation of the program and research regarding its effectiveness. Participants will be questioned through a pre and post-survey before receiving and reading the books and months later to determine the impact of using the storybooks. This project will be reported as a case study discussing how this research and community engagement project in a relatively undeveloped area was developed. Report goals will include assessment of strengths and weaknesses, the relationship between outcomes and prior research findings in the literature, and detailed information to facilitate replication or expansion of successful elements of the project. I will also be evaluating the project through the mid and final report for the Kathryn W. Davis Foundation.

My project will be successful if CIP are identified, and their caregivers are connected with more support through the community and other resources in the District. Due to the complex nature of parental incarceration and the consequences that it can have on children, this project promotes long-term positive effects for CIP by facilitating understanding and support for CIP as well as their parents and caregivers. Many of the effects of bibliotherapy will be subtle and long-term, not immediate. Therefore, success will also be measured through the indirect effects of the books (e.g. increased interest in reading and greater time spent relating to books). Additionally, success will be measured by asking participants whether they would recommend continuation and/or expansion of the project and why (or why not).

The intended outcomes for this project are to allow CIP in the District to not be invisible nor stigmatized while retaining privacy; increasing direct support for CIP; and enable or expand appropriate communication between IP and their children. This will be demonstrated by increased communication between IP in the BOP and their children in Washington DC. Additionally, I hope to see more IP request for materials to be sent to their children as they read the books themselves and understand the benefits of these books.

