

Kansas State University Libraries

New Prairie Press

Adult Education Research Conference

2006 Conference Proceedings (Minneapolis,
MN)

I Need My Mommy

Irene C. Baird
Penn State University

Follow this and additional works at: <https://newprairiepress.org/aerc>



Part of the [Adult and Continuing Education Administration Commons](#)



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial 4.0 License](#)

Recommended Citation

Baird, Irene C. (2006). "I Need My Mommy," *Adult Education Research Conference*.
<https://newprairiepress.org/aerc/2006/papers/7>

This is brought to you for free and open access by the Conferences at New Prairie Press. It has been accepted for inclusion in Adult Education Research Conference by an authorized administrator of New Prairie Press. For more information, please contact cads@k-state.edu.

I Need My Mommy

Irene C. Baird
Penn State Harrisburg

Keywords: drugs, incarcerated women, parenting

Abstract: Drugs, mandated sentencing, overflowing prisons have negatively affected the lives of 2.3 million children of inmates. This study explored the efficacy of esteem building and parenting perspectives for incarcerated mothers preparing for release.

Dear Mom, I hope you come home soon . . . I hope you never go back to jail again because I get fillings to when you go to jail (excerpt from a letter to a Mommy).

Introduction

The escalation of drug use among both genders, resulting in harmful/destructive behavior, is swelling prisons and jails to an unmanageable level. The most significant outcome is the devastating and often long-term impact on the children of inmates. In 2000, there were 3.6 million parents under some form of correctional supervision; they have produced a total of 2.3 million children. From a patriarchal perspective, the Corrections System is responding slowly by introducing programs on fathering; currently, however, the focus is more on pre-release preparation for financial security to reduce recidivism and, presumably, to provide child support. Alternatively, 70% of the incarcerated females are mothers, mostly single heads of household (Golden, 2005); the mind-set regarding them is that if they had been "good" girls, wives, mothers, they would not be in their present situation; they wouldn't need to learn how to be financially secure because there would be a responsible father to fill that role. It is assumed, however, that as females they should instinctively know how to parent even though, under the best of circumstances, there is limited preparation for the role (Thompson, 2000). These are unrealistic expectations of those who may want to fulfill, even succeed as mothers but have had minimal or poor parenting models. They may suffer from esteem issues provoked by a dominant society that defines gender roles and a life history that may include abuse, drugs, neglect and extreme poverty. The purpose of this study, therefore, was to present two groups of female inmates, within the context of a county jail, a Freirian-oriented program that addressed (1) self identity/definition and (2) positive parenting perspectives as preparation for community re-entry.

Methodology

For this study, Feminist Identity Theory and the Narrative Process complemented the Freirian-based framework, a model that began as a 1992 pilot project with homeless women and has been implemented at a county jail since 1994 (Baird, 1999, 1997a, 1997b, 1994). It involves engaging learners in reading, reflecting on and discussing literature by authors of similar race, class and experience in order to better understand and address their own crises. Subsequently they write poetry or prose on themes relevant to their own situations. Since research claims that improvements in self-esteem benefit the mother/child relationship (Parke & Clarke-Stewart, 2001), the intent of the process in this study was to provide the incarcerated women the opportunity and a medium for emerging from the prison "culture of silence" with a stronger sense of self while simultaneously exploring the parenting role.

Implicit in this process was defining one's reality, which Hill-Collins (1997) and Lorde (1997) maintain is the responsibility of those who have and own the experiences. The narrative component reinforced the process by helping learners understand their experiences. Empowerment resulted from reading and reflecting on where they have been, where they are and where they want to be (Rappaport, 1995). Further empowerment was derived from seeing their writing in print in the collection of stories they selected for their own publication.

The study was conducted with two separate groups housed in a county jail. Interruptions such as hearings and lockdowns prevented a consistent number of participants in the sessions for which they could volunteer. Fifteen to twenty women managed to complete each of the two sessions devoted to this study. In both groups the women ranged in age from mid-twenties to mid-thirties; they were African-American, Anglo-American and Latina. The majority were confined primarily for drug-related issues.

The intent during the first ten-week session was to spend forty-five minutes on self-identity by revisiting childhood experiences after reading and reflecting on those of authors Patrice Gaines (1994) and Iyanla Vanzant (1998). The remaining forty-five minutes of each meeting were facilitated by a parenting educator who provided age-specific materials on children's development and management. The second group, during another ten week session, was a similar demographic. They were exposed to the same process and materials without benefit of the parenting educator. The same results were obtained for this group.

Self Discovery: I Am

Julia Boyd set the stage with her admonition to develop a healthy self-esteem "by being able to define ourselves for ourselves with two powerful words: I Am The inmates then used, as a reflective stimulus, the traumatizing life experiences detailed in the Gaines (1994) and Vanzant (1998) autobiographies. They were intent on telling their own stories, on defining their "I Am"; they also used their childhood experiences to reflect on what they had learned from these experiences. As an example, one inmate reading Gaines' reference of blaming her negative behavior on her father because of his failure to show love and because of an assumption that her father considered her worthless, prompted her to recall her own situation.

My fathers love . . . that's what I want.
My fathers love . . . just a simple task, love me, tell me you care
My fathers love . . . teach me, guide me, show you understand
My fathers love . . . it could have saved me
My fathers love . . . something he never gave me. (1993, p. 147).

Vanzant's description of brutal physical and verbal treatment by her grandmother generated:

I need a mother who will not hit me when I do wrong
I just want her to love me, no matter what path I choose in life.
I just want her to love me.

Both Gaines and Vanzant were sexually abused when they were young. Gaines, in her reflections, writes of the guilt she carried, of feeling shame for "making those men do that to you" (1994, p. 32). That elicited the following reflection:

He would always "make up," relieve his guilt by giving candy to heal the wounds he inflicted. Maybe that's when my eating disorder really began. Good would right a wrong. "A spoonful of sugar" keeps the pain down in the most damaging of ways. Food became my drug of choice since by the time I was four . . . I used food like him to right a wrong – to make me better.

Another inmate critiqued Vanzant's life story in this fashion: She has been in a lot of unhealthy relationships and instead of being able to recognize this as abuse, she's believing . . . accepting this as love because this is all she knows . . . Her father didn't love her, he rarely spent time with her when she was a child so there he emotionally abused her. He beat her once unconscious so he physically abused her . . . she allowed herself to take the blame for whatever happens especially when it's wrong because she doesn't know how to take a stand. Why? Because she's always been taught that everything that happens is her fault.

These women were adept at identifying and relating to the authors' issues because they resembled their own, especially those of neglect and separation:

And in my early childhood I could remember when my mother started her addiction. I would see her leaving me and my sister late at night and I would stand by the door when she left and when I would hear the door knob I would run for the couch. But I could never remember why I would stay up and wait for her. Maybe cause I thought she would leave and never come back.

In the first group, as the sessions progressed, it became apparent that although the learners valued the parenting educator and her materials, they were not receptive to the "parenting education" approach. Their reactions were reminiscent of an evaluation by an inner city New York English teacher who tried to reach students through the power of writing. He found that they were not receptive to anything "abstract": it was all about the story (O'Conner, 1996). In addition to defining themselves through their stories on how they were parented, there were the realities they now faced: lack of visits from their children; lack of phone calls; wondering whether the caretaker was giving the children letters sent by the mothers; concern about the behavior of both the very young and the teenagers who were staying with grandparents or a father who was involved with drugs. As a result, the women expressed a preference for extending the first forty-five minute period with more reading and reflection

My Mommy Self

*I am in jail again . . . there's one thing I . . . must think about . . .
what I brought into this world, my children (inmate's reflection).*

Gaines' (1994) and Vanzant's (1998) words seemed to assume a parable-like nature as their transformation evolved in their writing. As a result, the women now directed their thoughts to their children and their role as Mommy.

I have four beautiful children who I caused a lot of hurt and pain. I tried to ask myself was it something went wrong when I was growing up. I can't remember my mother as a single parent really stressing the importance of family values or how important it was to be there thro thick and thin.

Another mother asked where she went wrong as a parent: "I try my best but still as much as I want to nothing can change the fact that I left my child alone at the age of four." A not uncommon story was the real frustration of experiencing uncontrolled behavior on the part of the 5-year old who was "so cute and cuddly" as an infant: "I found out that having a baby is not what it's all crack up to be. I'm so afraid I'm not raising him the right way . . . I now have an angry child . . . What happen to such a sweet little boy . . . Did I fail him as a mother or do the best I can?" And finally,

I have kids
I promise never to hit them
To be a better parent is my choice
Once I'm living with them again everyone will see
That I'm a better parent than my daddy and mommy.

Conclusion

As preparation for release and potential for reunification with their children, the women in this study supported the efficacy of Identity Theory and the narrative process, especially in their strong preference for learning through the story, for expressing reflections on the past and present to provide direction for the future. In terms of identity, they considered their role as women and mothers one which they could fulfill, even in which they might excel. Golden (2005) found that incarcerated mothers who have suffered through abuse, neglect and separation, which they tried to assuage through drugs, tended to embrace a traditional gender role, "clinging [to it] because it gave a cohesion and respect the dominant culture promised would be theirs."

The purpose and findings from this study were confirmed by Sharp's research which promoted parenting education, adding that although child development is necessary, incarcerated mothers "need work on what it means to be a mother, and how this affects their self-esteem (2003, p. 179). Boyd adds, "So often [our] decisions have to be between a bad choice and a worse choice . . . but we don't have to give up believing in ourselves" (1993, p. 179). To which, an inmate speaking for the group, responded, "I can't change the past but I can make a better future [for my child and me]."

In addition to helping the mother become a better parent than she had had, there need to be more studies on the children who experience a range of problems, physically, emotionally and behaviorally. The issue of separation by itself requires attention. Finally there are a series of other needs if we care about our communities:

1. Education and job training that focus on non-traditional areas that provide benefits and upward mobility for self-sufficiency;
2. Community service rather than incarceration to eliminate separation from children;
3. Social policy that educates the community about the needs of the incarcerated and their children, especially social policies that are sensitive to the issues of the minorities who are disproportionately incarcerated;
4. Seamless social services;
5. Programs on prevention rather than programs for women in prison.

References

- Baird, I. C. (1994). The humanities for homeless women: A paradox in learning. *Adult Learning*, 5(3),13,15.
- Baird, I. C. (1997a). *Unlocking the cell: A humanities model for marginalized women*. Washington, DC: AAACE Publishers.
- Baird, I. C. (1997b). Imprisoned bodies – free minds: Incarcerated women and liberatory learning. In J. Holford, C. Griffin, P. Jarvis (Eds.). *Conference Proceedings of the International Conference of Life Long Learning*. University of Surrey, Guilford, England.
- Baird, I. C. (1999). Shattering the silence: Education, incarceration and the marginalization of women. In P. Sissel & V. Sheared (Eds.). *Making space: Reframing practice in adult education*. Westport, CT: Greenwood.
- Boyd, J. (1993). *In the company of my sisters*. New York: Plume/Penguin Books.
- Freire, P. (1992). *Pedagogy of the oppressed* (Rev ed.). New York: The Continuum Publishing Company.
- Gaines, P. (1994). *Laughing in the dark*. New York: Doubleday.
- Golden, R. (2005). *War on the families: Mothers in prison and the families they leave behind*. New York: Routledge.
- Hill Collins, P. (1997). Defining black feminist thought. In L. Nicholson (Ed.). *The second wave: A reader in feminist theory* (pp. 24-259). New York: Routledge.
- Lorde, A. (1997). Defining black feminist thought. In L. Nicholson (Ed.), *The second wave: A reader in feminist theory* (pp. 245, 247). New York: Routledge.
- O'Connor, S. (1996). *Will my name be shouted out?* New York: Touchstone.
- Parke, R., & Clarke-Stewart, K. (2000). *Effects of parental incarceration on young children*. Online. Retrieved April 1, 2006 from <http://aspe.hhs.gov/hsp/prison2home02/parke-stewart.htm>
- Rappaport, J. (1995). Empowerment meets narrative: Listening to stories and creating settings. *Journal of Community Psychology*, 23(1).
- Sharp, S. (2003). *The incarcerated woman*. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall.
- Thompson P., & N. Harm (2000). Parenting from prison: Helping children and mothers. *Comprehensive Pediatric Nursing*, 23, 61-81.
- Vanzant, I. (1998). *Yesterday, I cried*. New York: Fireside.