

ABSTRACT

This study addresses two areas of need in the literature. First, we recognize the impact of experiential-learning on student outcomes and fewer opportunities within the social sciences. Second, as academics in criminal justice and education, we are aware of educational needs of incarcerated persons. The current study blended together experiential-learning alongside a reading program within one state's women's correctional facility, targeting (grand)mothers. Two faculty and 40 students, spanning two academic departments, completed a research-based experiential-learning project with one community partner. This undergraduate project sought to benefit students, incarcerated (grand)mothers, and the (grand)children of incarcerated (grand)mothers through a read-aloud program. Through student observations, themed results found incarcerated (grand)mothers had negative school experiences regarding reading. Subsequently, they did not read with their (grand)children prior to incarceration but used reading as a means to escape their incarceration. Students' reflections demonstrated value to self, participants, and the community, through participation in research-based experiential-learning.

A CROSS-DISCIPLINARY UNDERGRADUATE RESEARCH PROJECT: BONDING THROUGH BOOKS WITH INCARCERATED MOTHERS AND GRANDMOTHERS

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"It is clear that undergraduate research, by any definition, is beneficial. For students, the opportunity to define a problem and work toward a solution that might have practical, real-life applications constitutes significant value" (Beckman & Hensel, 2009, p. 43).

Experiential-Learning

Many academics support the idea that learning is best understood as a process (see Kolb, 1984; Penn, 2003). Experiential-learning, a broad set of pedagogical practices, captures a range of processes whereby students learn from connecting experience to classroom learning, and beyond. As one example, Burch and colleagues (2016) reviewed forty years of research, finding experiential-learning activities continue to increase student learning. More specifically, participating in research-based projects is more effective for teaching students methods, skills, and an appreciation for research than course readings and assignments (DeLyser et al., 2013) and also promotes the necessary development of skills for success in today's workforce (Mellon et al., 2018).

Research-Based Experiential-Learning

"The goal of higher education should be to facilitate learning through experiences" (McClellan &

Hyle, 2012, p. 240). Undergraduate research, much like the many forms of experiential-learning, benefit students through skill development (Craney et al., 2011) and improvements in technical and interpersonal skills (Kardash, 2000; Landrum & Nelsen, 2002), producing greater gains in student learning outcomes (Astin, 1997). Studies have consistently found students have increased content knowledge and both technical and analytical skills as well as self-efficacy (Jordan et al., 2014; Shaffer et al., 2010). Research-based projects also have the potential to benefit students by increasing motivation in the field (Alkahrer & Dolan, 2014), learning to tolerate obstacles (Jordan et al., 2014; Shaffer et al., 2010), interacting with peers (Alkahrer & Dolan, 2014), and gaining a sense of belonging to a larger community (Jordan et al., 2014; Shaffer et al., 2010).

Yet, most previous studies find fewer opportunities for student research within the social sciences and humanities than the natural sciences (Seymour et al., 2004). Additionally, according to Ishiyama (2002), further value is added in cross-discipline research as it positively influences independent analytical development. Through unique and innovative research-based cross-discipline learning activities, students can grow through unfamiliar context, stepping outside of familiar environments and seeing themselves as researchers (McClellan & Hyle, 2012). This can be accomplished through community-based research, taking on more of a problem-solving focus geared towards students' development and skill acquisition, and less focused on publishable outcomes (Beckman & Hensel, 2009). Course-based undergraduate research experiences (CUREs) have gained attention as an effective way to engage students in research (Corwin et al., 2015). Therefore, the purpose of this study was to explore how literacy could play a role in facilitating a relationship between incarcerated mothers/grandmothers and their children/grandchildren as part of an undergraduate cross-disciplinary research project.

Literacy and Incarcerated Women

Sixty-to-sixty-two-percent of mothers in state prisons had minor children prior to incarceration (Glaze & Maruschak, 2008; Hagan & Foster, 2012; Huebner & Gustafson, 2007). Research has also shown the longer one is incarcerated, the more difficult it becomes for mothers to maintain relationships with their children (Arditti, 2012). These findings, coupled with statistics suggesting that up to 70% of U.S. incarcerated populations are functionally illiterate (Loring, 2012), create a great opportunity for helping mothers/grandmothers, through literacy, maintain prosocial relationships with their children/grandchildren.

The National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) considers fourth-grade literacy a predictor for future achievement. Approximately 68% of children in the U.S. do not meet this standard, with most coming from rural, low-income, or at-risk homes (Zoukis, 2016). *This statistic mirrors incarcerated women in our midwestern state. With most incarcerated women being parents of minors, and over one-third being the mother of multiple children (Glaze & Maruschak, 2008), this work is timely and important. Incarcerated mothers report concerns about separation from their children*

and find retaining bonds is one of the most challenging aspects of serving time (Kazura, 2001). Positive social supports, such as communicating with one's child, has been shown to reduce prison acting out, reintegration, and recidivism (reoffense) (Cochran & Mears, 2013).

Research on prison reading programs targeting parents and children have shown successful outcomes in maintaining parental connections while reducing the negative impact of parental incarceration (Blumberg & Griffin, 2013). The Storybook program, offered by Aid to Inmate Mothers, has sent local volunteers to prisons to aid with recording mothers reading a children's book. However, programs like this cannot address the shame and embarrassment of illiterate mothers—those either avoiding the program or needing assistance with reading. Incarcerated parents with literacy deficiencies have been linked to having children placed at high-risk for becoming less than proficient readers themselves (Glaze & Maruschak, 2008). According to the Annie E. Casey Foundation (2009), children of incarcerated parents are one of the most vulnerable groups of children struggling with functional literacy.

Purpose of the Study

It was the faculty members' hope that involvement in an undergraduate project exposing students to the process of research would allow students to learn about unique barriers mothers/grandmothers experience when "doing time." Additionally, knowing that many youths with incarcerated parents struggle to reach literacy milestones (see Glaze & Maruschak, 2008), faculty members believed that students' involvement in the research project would provide an example of applying techniques to serve these youth and ultimately work to increase their interest in reading and reduce their involvement within the juvenile justice system. Lastly, while students engaged in observation-based research while in attendance of the different research phases, the two faculty members engaged in their own mixed-methods research. Faculty engaged the women in conversation through questions surrounding literacy and parenting practices. These question probes were intended to generate conversation regarding the project and allow students to observe responses. Two example questions included, "*How do you fulfill your role as 'parent/grandparent' while separated from your children/grandchild?*" and, "*In what ways have/do you use reading in your life since you have been incarcerated?*"

Faculty members facilitated connections for students between their real-world experiences and in-class learning of terminology, theory, methodology, and best practices of their profession. It was anticipated that students would gain a deeper understanding of how to relate ethically and sensitively with people of a diverse background, as reported on their final reflection paper. Further, faculty members expected the project would provide for the modeling of research methods to further examine real-world system barriers experienced by incarcerated mothers/grandmothers. Students were able to apply one methodological approach to research collection by engaging in field observation when interacting with the incarcerated (grand)mothers. The project allowed faculty to assess the impact research-

based experiential-learning can have on students' learning experiences while also engaging the incarcerated (grand)mothers in a project intended to increase interest in reading for self and (grand)children. As such, the project included the following working questions:

1. According to student observations, what themes exist regarding reading experiences for incarcerated mothers and grandmothers?
2. According to student perceptions, how are students impacted from participation in a research-based experiential-learning project?

Methods

As part of a larger collaborative project, this research received many approvals to ensure ethical conduct. The researchers first secured Institutional Review Board approval at their current university. Next, the researchers received correctional facility approval from the current Deputy Warden. Additionally, the research was then approved by the Executive Committee who oversees prison research within the state's Department of Corrections. Upon approval of this committee, the final approval was provided by the state's Secretary for the Department of Corrections. An amendment to the original IRB included requests to use an in-class student assignment for research and this amendment (submitted just to the university) was not submitted to the other entities as it only impacted ethical concerns regarding the instructors/researchers using a course assignment as part of the data collection process. This amendment was also approved by the current university's IRB. The incarcerated sample as well as student samples all completed an informed consent process outlining the project.

Faculty

As noted above, the research-based experiential-learning project was embedded in a larger project including two faculty members (n=2)—one within a department of criminal justice and a second in a teacher education department. One faculty member held expertise in working with incarcerated girls and women as well as at-risk youths, while the other was a recognized reading and literacy expert, knowledgeable of the impacts of the school-to-prison pipeline. Both faculty have experience sponsoring and monitoring a variety of experiential-learning projects.

Students

In total, 40 undergraduate students participated in the project. Students were currently enrolled in an upper-division women and crime course housed in a criminal justice department (n=24) as well as an upper-division literacy assessment and interventions course in a teacher education department (n=16). At the beginning of the semester, all participating students completed the Collaborative Institutional Training Initiative (CITI) and teacher education students completed an additional confidentiality training. The students' role then included engaging in field observation including note taking. Teacher education students also provided weekly read aloud examples to the participants as part of their course requirements.

Incarcerated (Grand)Mothers

Several criteria were used to recruit mothers/grandmothers at a rural Midwestern state's only women's correctional facility. With the aid of the facility's Women's Activity Learning Center (WALC) coordinator, women were recruited who met the following criteria: 1) women needed to be at, or below, a basic reading level based on educational assessments completed at the facility during the intake process; 2) women needed legal rights to communicate with their children/grandchildren throughout the duration of the project; and 3) women needed to have at least six months of time left to-be-served (to complete the full project). Participants who resided in maximum-security level units were excluded, per facility request, as these units were devoid of any means to viewing virtual read aloud videos (one aspect of the research project).

In total, 16 mothers and five grandmothers ($n=21$) were recruited by the WALC coordinator. The age of participating mothers ranged from 23 to 41 ($M_{age} = 32$, $SD = 5.5$) with the range for grandmothers being 42 to 49 ($M_{age} = 45.5$, $SD = 4.95$). Consistent with the racial and ethnic compositions for the state, 18 participants (14 mothers, four grandmothers) identified as white while the remaining four (two mothers, one grandmother) identified as Black. Mothers reported having one to five children ($M = 3.7$) while grandmothers reported having one to seven grandchildren ($M = 4.1$). All mothers/grandmothers (100%) had completed a parenting program at the facility prior to the current study involvement.

Data Collection

Faculty and students within the criminal justice and teacher education departments met the participating mothers and grandmothers at the beginning of the academic semester, via Zoom. Students engaged in observation-based qualitative research during this visit as well as an end-of-semester gathering (also completed remotely). Faculty researchers asked the participating women questions about reading and parenting experiences and students were asked to document their observations regarding their responses.

After completing the initial meeting, students enrolled in the literacy practicum course then recorded two ten-minute read aloud sessions per week, to then be supplied to the WALC coordinator. Participating mothers/grandmothers were able to watch the read aloud recordings each week as they followed along in the provided young-adult chapter books as well as selected children's books. These books were mailed and supplied before the initial meeting. In total, the participating women viewed recordings for a total of 12 weeks. After completing the review of the recordings mothers and grandmothers were then aided in recording themselves reading a recordable book with the help of the correctional facility staff.

Throughout the academic semester, all students engaged in two reflection days. During the reflection days, students shared their notes from the observations, including suggested themes. These days were unstructured and guided by organic discussion about their proposed findings. Towards the end of the semester, students were also required to complete a final reflection essay focused on the totality of the semester-long

research-based experiential-learning project. Students were provided with a rubric asking them to reflect on their overall awareness for the purpose of the service-learning project; explicitly connecting the project to societal issues as well as course content; and expressing any changes in self due to their participation. All reflection components were a required part of the project participation, but students could opt out of their responses being used for research purposes. All 40 students provided consent.

Data Analysis

The data collected as evidence in this study were analyzed using a deduction model of reasoning common to qualitative studies. Independently, students color-coded the data to help guide them during the data analysis process. The use of anecdotal notes was especially important as they helped the students identify the key information relevant to the study. Then, separately, the criminal justice and teacher education classes worked collaboratively within class, to identify common themes across observations. With the guidance of the two faculty members, a consensus was made on the final observed themes.

Findings

Student Observations

The incarceration rates for women continue to rise, with most of these women fulfilling the role of primary caretakers and mothers/grandmothers of school-aged children. Professionals in the fields of both criminal justice and education must arm themselves with knowledge regarding the role literacy plays in student success and being able to function as a productive member of society. Historically, literacy has been used for a wide array of purposes such as self-help, entertainment, and education. In this project, the researchers had hoped to use literacy as a platform to provide an opportunity for mothers and grandmothers to bond with their children/grandchildren while allowing students to observe the process first-hand. Specifically, the purpose of this study was to explore how literacy could play a role in facilitating a relationship between mothers/grandmothers and their (grand)children as part of an undergraduate cross-disciplinary experiential-learning project and how such a project and student involvement could impact student learning.

Theme One: Negative feelings about school experiences

Most of the mothers/grandmothers described early struggles in elementary school, especially when learning to read. For example, one mother/grandmother described her literacy acquisition as, "*behind the other students in my class.*" Her classmates teased her for reading slow and often made so much fun of her that she became reluctant to read aloud when called upon in class. Another mother/grandmother discussed how numerous moves during her education resulted in frequent changes in schools. She reported that this interruption of learning undoubtedly played a role in her academic struggles. Each mother/grandmother reported some type of traumatic event in

their lives that clouded their academic success. Persistent difficulties at home such as domestic abuse and financial struggles made academic achievement an afterthought. Gradual disengagement from school occurred because of a disconnection from peers, problems at home, or because many of the women were thought of as troublemakers by teachers and officials at school.

Theme Two: Reading not central to parenting

Low literacy is an intergenerational problem. According to the Foundation for Child Development (2014), the strongest indicator of a child's success in school is the mother's level of education. Many of the mothers/grandmothers reported not reading to their children/grandchildren regularly before incarceration. Admittedly, they did not relegate much of their time to share books with their children/grandchildren due to work demands and other obstacles they faced in their daily lives. Furthermore, many reported having few books in the house and felt uncomfortable with their own reading abilities to read books aloud. All of the mothers/grandmothers were excited to be considered for this study and were optimistic that it would help them develop their confidence and skills to enable them to share books with their children/grandchildren. One mother said, *"I don't get to see my kids much since I'm here. It's too far. What you all are doing is great. I just want to be a better mom to them."*

Theme Three: Reading as a means to escape

The mothers/grandmothers participating in the study claimed to spend a good majority of their free time reading. Although the preference of genres differed on occasion, many of the mothers/grandmothers mentioned James Patterson and Kathy Reichs novels along with self-help books as their go-to for reading pleasure. One mother/grandmother said, *"I'm trying to improve myself you know, so I can try and have a better life in here and when I get out."* Other women reported enjoying familiar titles such as *The Diary of Anne Frank* and the Bible. One mother/grandmother said, *"Reading books takes me somewhere new, somewhere different than here."*

Students' Personal Reflections

Criminal justice and teacher education students connected in-class lecture to real-world issues while learning about the research process and importance of community-based partnerships. According to Beckman and Hensel (2009), undergraduate research can be viewed on a continuum. According to their continuum, this project moved learning away from an outcome, product-centered form of learning to a student, process-centered focus. A few examples of students' thoughts regarding their involvement with the project taken from written reflections follow:

Awareness of Purpose for Service-Learning.

The kids had not received their books just yet, but I can imagine how much it would mean to them. I am sure it is hard having a parent in prison, but having a book like this, with their mother or grandmother's voice,

would be something they could forever cherish. They would have a physical copy to hold until they see their mother or grandmother again.

The best part of this semester was my service learning activity. We completed this activity while everyone was learning. This literacy program teaches women to better read which they can pass on to their kids. This may mean their kids are less likely to get in trouble in school and maybe they can stay out of the juvenile justice system.

Critical Thinking.

I want to continue helping people because of the positive effect this project had on others. I have a humbling feeling when I realize the different reasons that got a person into prison, which could go as far back as issues with their literacy. Drawing on issues such as literacy, from their past, and thinking about how we could change this, may have resulted in a different outcome. This intervention is worth the time and effort, and I feel inspired and want to help.

Some kids are not given the right interventions to help them do well in school or life. This class taught me how some of these needs are not met and how kids are not given the right interventions and resources. Some things we cannot change, but there should be accountability in our communities to see that all kids, of all backgrounds, are helped.

Impact on Personal Life.

Thank you for creating this opportunity. It truly was life changing. This project changed how I view my own life and how lucky and blessed I am. My heart was pounding out of my chest talking to these women and I cried when visiting with them. Thank you so much for this experience!!

This classroom experience was a once in a lifetime event and I thank you for the best day. I enjoyed listening to these women and seeing their eyes light up when they were told about receiving the books and recordings to give to their children/grandchildren. I will never forget this experience. The opportunity was amazing and helped me look at new ideas.

Application to the Course Content.

In class, we learned about the gendered pathways research and how girls enter the juvenile justice system. This project helped me see this pathway for girls transitioning into our adult correctional facility. I heard one woman talk about being a juvenile in the system, and someone who got into trouble. So, I was about to see the gendered pathway.

I learned in my literacy class that incarcerated women have lower literacy scores than those who live in their own homes. This evidence shows why it was so important for the project we completed. We helped their literacy skills so they could then teach their kids, in turn. Maybe this would help keep their kids out of the juvenile justice system.

This project allowed students the opportunity to explicitly connect how societal issues—literacy deficits, compounded with gendered issues—lead many young women into the juvenile and criminal justice systems. Subsequently, their children are then at greater risk for this intergenerational cycle.

Challenges and Lessons Learned

The current project, an unlikely cross-disciplinary collaborative research project, has partnered criminal justice and teacher education students with incarcerated mothers/grandmothers and a community partner. Bonding through books with incarcerated mothers and grandmothers was a unique research-based project promoting attention to a community need—targeting a rising population of incarcerated mothers—a group typically at or below basic reading levels. While this project has many strengths for all involved, lessons learned must also be disclosed.

First, accessing a correctional population is a time-consuming, tedious task, requiring much preparation. The current project took nearly one full year to gain access even with one faculty member having an already established relationship with the state’s department of corrections and women’s correctional facility. With additional amendments made, the faculty researchers then had to secure additional IRB approvals and ensure students completed CITI training. Faculty considering a similar project should be prepared to set up the community partnership at least one year in advance. This helps to secure the facility’s approval process, state requirements, and university IRB protocol. Faculty should also consider the chronological order of these approvals—as the process ebbs and flows.

Second, faculty should be knowledgeable of facility operations and general correctional facility populations. Criminal justice students may be more attuned to these processes and demographics but non-majors are likely not formally educated on working with an incarcerated population. Many times, their “knowledge” is that which they have observed in popular television shows relating to the criminal justice field. For the current project, the criminal justice faculty member met with the teacher education students to provide basic information on incarcerated women, their backgrounds, daily living experiences in correctional facilities, and security steps and issues. This pre-research work is a must in preparing students for this type of experience.

Faculty must also be proactive in outlining objectives, goals, outcomes, and working questions. Many times, this is drafted in collaboration with the community partner. Other times, the faculty may realize better means to measuring the effectiveness of projects mid-activity. In the current project, faculty discovered, post-completion, the lack of quantifiable measures for reaching goals outside of reflection days and an assigned reflection paper with an accompanying rubric. To produce

“evidence” of project effectiveness, faculty should think deeply about the most meaningful approach(es) to measuring the impact of their project, on students, and their community partner(s).

Ending Remarks and Beginning Discussions

The current research-based experiential-learning project began as a pilot project and has undergone several modifications since its inception. The researchers would recommend this of other institutions. Piloting such an intensive out-of-class project requires much labor, funding, and commitment outside most regular requirements of universities. Prior to exerting efforts to make this a long-term commitment, it is wise to first focus on a small group of participants. This allows faculty to work out issues and overcome barriers prior to including too many participants and/or students. Additionally, syllabi should include a point value related to the project—when projects are optional, students will be less engaged, at least upfront. When community partners are relying on the student involvement, the relationship is negatively impacted if students do not follow through.

This continued partnership has potential to impact the research community and practitioners, both in the fields of literacy and criminal justice, while providing benefits to the incarcerated individuals, their children, and students. This project has the ability to be expanded to other correctional facilities across the U.S. While we targeted incarcerated mothers and grandmothers, work could be done with incarcerated juvenile mothers as well as fathers and grandfathers. Such an initiative provides students with the opportunity to engage in research-based experiential-learning with diverse populations. The project requires extensive collaboration, but is worth it, in order to gain the rich and unique experiences for all involved. Future students can assist with the exploration of outside funding to sustain this one-of-a-kind, research-based experiential-learning project.

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