When parenting doesn't 'come naturally': providers' perspectives on parenting education for incarcerated mothers and fathers.

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Abstract

Learning to parent sensitively and safely can be challenging for adults with childhood abuse and neglect experiences. Such childhood experiences are prevalent among incarcerated parents whose ability to parent their own children is also limited by separation from them. Several prisons have developed programs to foster pro-social parenting skills among incarcerated mothers and fathers to assist them on release. This paper reports a qualitative research study that explored the factors affecting the delivery and outcomes of parenting programs in correctional facilities in New South Wales Australia from the perspective of individuals involved in developing and implementing the programs. Thematic analysis of nineteen interviews identified two main themes: supporting parents' learning in correctional settings and providers' learning about parent education in correctional settings. Respondents reported the benefits of providing creative learning opportunities enabling parents to build on their strengths and to develop relationships. These factors contributed to changing prisoners' attitudes and supporting them to consider alternative parenting approaches. The co-productive approach to parent education supported enhanced parenting knowledge amongst parents and greater insights amongst educators. Parenting education can be successfully delivered in correctional settings and can assist incarcerated parents build on existing knowledge and adapt it for their own needs.

KEY WORDS

Parent education, incarcerated parents, qualitative research, co-production of knowledge, prison

INTRODUCTION

Learning to be a parent is often taken for granted as a "natural" part of growing into adulthood. It is substantially an outcome of childhood exposure to the care individuals receive from their own parents and other significant caregivers. Parenting knowledge and skills often develop through everyday experiences passed on by adults, usually parents, modeling parenting behaviours, and through being exposed to family and community rituals, values and habits. It is now accepted that children are primed for learning from conception and that much learning about how to parent is through intergenerational transmission of knowledge and behaviours (Lomanowska et al. 2015; Shaffer et al. 2009).

Many incarcerated parents had frequent childhood experiences of punitive parenting; their histories include abuse, neglect, parental incarceration or multiple out-of-home placements (Farrington et al. 2015; Thornberry, Freeman-Gallant and Lovegrove 2009). Critically, in many countries, where there are increasing prison populations (Walmsley 2016), the development of pro-social parenting skills has the potential to ameliorate this trend.

The intergenerational transfer of parenting knowledge and skills are well recognised: in short, we parent the way we were parented (Lomanowska et al., 2015). Learning to parent sensitively and safely is difficult for adults whose childhood experiences consisted of abuse and neglect. Breaking these continuing and undesirable intergenerational parenting cycles requires significant exposure to alternative parenting approaches through education and support. This is now identified as a core preventative intervention (Child Welfare Information Gateway 2013). Nevertheless, implementing parenting programs within a correctional system is complex, both practically and pedagogically (Perry et al. 2011).

Many correctional institutions have developed programs to help foster parenting skills amongst prisoners (for example see, LaRosa and Rank 2001; Newman, Fowler and Cashin 2011). While studies have described many programs and the

outcomes for the incarcerated parents (Buston 2012; Perry et al. 2011; Loper and Tuerk 2006), few have explored the experience of correctional staff and other stakeholders in implementing and delivering parenting education interventions within the custodial environment. Neither have the achievement of program outcomes been explored with these respondents. While studies of participants' perspectives are vital to improving the programs, the accounts of facilitators and other education providers offer a more complete understanding of the often subtle but important approaches used within these programs. Their perspective can assist educators aiming to provide parenting support and understanding to parents in custody.

In order to identify successful strategies and best practice in this specialised adult education area, the current paper explores the perspective of correctional staff and others involved in providing parenting education and support for incarcerated mothers and fathers. These respondents have identified issues, strategies and outcomes that give insight into how these education programs create appropriate opportunities for learning, by focusing on parenting strengths and incorporating culturally appropriate resources and activities.

The data reported in this paper are derived from a larger research study "Breaking the Cycle for Incarcerated Parents: Towards Pro-Social Parenting" investigating the parenting education and support needs of incarcerated parents. Other papers from this study explore the incarcerated parents' experiences of participating in parenting programs (Rossiter et al. 2015; 2017; Fowler et al. 2017).

BACKGROUND

In many countries, there are significant and increasing populations of incarcerated adults. For example, since 2000 the total prison population in the Oceania region has increased by nearly 60% and in the Americas by 40% (Walmsley 2016). Importantly, many adults in prison are either birth or step parents, whose incarceration has significant and long-reaching negative

outcomes for their children (Arditti 2012; Dallaire 2007; Dawson et al. 2013; Geller et al. 2009; Kjellstrand and Eddy 2011; Murray, Farrington & Sekol 2012).

This research took place within the criminal correction system in New South Wales (NSW) Australia, and particularly focused the two main programs operating in NSW prisons at the time: *Mothering at a Distance* (MAAD) (Perry et al. 2011; Rossiter et al. 2015) for incarcerated mothers and *Babiin Miyagang* for Indigenous fathers, uncles and grandfathers (Beatty and Doran 2007; Rossiter etal. 2017). These programs consist of 6-to-10 group sessions for parents with dependent children, delivered either weekly over several weeks, or more intensively over a fortnight. Sessions are approximately two hours long and address topics as: communication, child development and behaviour, and child safety. The wider study identified that the majority of prisoners who participated in this research have never previously participated in any parenting education activities (Rossiter et al. 2017).

A key focus of these parenting programs is to develop parenting capacity and skills. For some incarcerated parents, this requires a significant change to their belief systems and behaviour (Perry et al. 2011) and to how they experience learning processes. The two parenting programs have elements of co-production as their framework. Co-production involves individuals and local communities in being more actively involved in contributing knowledge, with all participants learning from each other (Dunston et al. 2009), blurring traditional boundaries between student and facilitator (Bovaird 2007). In both these parenting programs the activities enabled the parents to share their experiences and existing knowledge to enable the development of new knowledge – a coproduction of knowledge.

The learning environment within a correctional facility can be extremely challenging for the prisoners and educators. Issues of low education levels amongst participants, drug addiction, regulation of behaviour, family violence (Kjellstrand et al. 2012) and parents' limited contact with their children to practise skills can all influence the learning environment negatively.

General agreement exists that some parents require parent education programs to develop the sensitive and responsive parenting skills that are essential for protecting children from abuse and neglect (Celinska and Siegal 2010; Child Welfare Information Gateway 2013; Volmert et al. 2016). Providing these programs within a correctional setting can be challenging for the correctional organisation, facilitators and incarcerated parents, as the custodial context involves a need for security and the, often unplanned, transfer of prisoners (Perry et al. 2011).

This paper aims to contribute to a greater understanding of prison-based parenting education programs, from the perspective of educators and others involved in developing and delivering these programs in practice. It examines the factors affecting how programs are implemented and how prisoners learn about parenting. Further, it explores what the providers themselves have learnt about supporting parent education in correctional settings.

METHODS

Research questions

This study examined education providers' experiences and reflections on their practice in conducting parenting programs for incarcerated mothers and fathers. It addressed two inter-related research questions: how to support incarcerated parents' learning, given the many challenges to education in correctional settings; and what have program facilitators learnt about parenting education.

Study design

This research used an interpretive description methodology in anticipation that it would guide informed questioning, reflection and critical examination, and would assist in informing practice (Thorne et al. 2004). Interpretive description focuses on a practice phenomenon (Thorne 2008). For this study the phenomenon is the perception of the parent education and support needs of incarcerated parents held by correctional staff and other involved respondents.

Interpretive description aims to understand what we know and do not know on the basis of the data (Thorne 2008). Interpretative description is identified as useful for small scale qualitative investigations of subjective perceptions that answer clinical or practice relevant questions (Thorne et al. 2004).

Data collection

Four researchers conducted semi-structured interviews with 19 parent education stakeholders (respondents) who had experience in developing and/or delivering parenting education in correctional settings, or in the needs of incarcerated parents more generally. Respondents with expertise in the issues we wished to address included educators, Aboriginal program officers, program facilitators and coordinators, counsellors and policy advisors.

Potential respondents were identified by the study team (which included senior staff in the correctional authority) and then approached by email with an invitation to participate. The interviews addressed: respondents' experiences of providing or supporting parent education within a correctional setting; barriers and facilitators to participation in education programs; approaches to engage incarcerated parents in parent education programs; and program outcomes.

Three interviews were conducted with small groups (ranging from two-to-four participants); the remainder were one-to-one interviews, conducted either face-to-face or by telephone. Interviews were digitally recorded, with the consent of respondents, and were de-identified and professionally transcribed.

Ethics

Ethics approval was received from the University of Technology Sydney and Corrective Services NSW. Respondents were provided with information sheets prior to signing the consent form and advised that information provided would be de-identified to maintain confidentiality and that they could withdraw from the study at any time.

Data Analysis

Interpretative description requires researchers to avoid pre-existing assumptions. The researchers ask skilful questions of the data and generate useful conceptualisations to explore the research question (Thorne et al. 2004).

We used several analysis activities, often informal methods, to work with the data (Thorne 2008). These activities were not always linear but required going back to the original data to confirm analysis decisions. The majority of the initial analysis process was conducted by two researchers. They commenced with data comprehension that required the reading and re-reading of transcripts and when necessary re-listening to the interview recordings to ensure the context of the quote was not distorted. Initial decisions were made about data that had similar properties, making margin notes and highlighting the corresponding data. We then conducted meaning synthesis of the data, continuing to draw similarities between data and linkages within the data to start to form codes. Interpretative description at this stage requires care not to derail the process by the use of excessive precision, but rather to use broad-based coding (Thorne 2008). Once the data are organised into groupings, we identified the relationship between the data.

The continuing analysis requires making sense of these relationships to build a cohesive whole. Finally, gaining consensus and making final decisions about themes and subthemes (Thorne et al. 2004) involved all researchers. Any disagreements about the coding of the data were discussed and either the original coding was retained, or data were recoded.

RESULTS

Sample

Most respondents were employed by CSNSW either as parenting program facilitators (N=8) or managers (N=9). The two external respondents were a director of a non-government organisation and an academic. In most instances the respondents' quotes have not been attributed to either the *MAAD* or *Babiin Miyagang* programs due to the small number and potential for easy identification of corrective services staff that facilitate these two programs.

Findings

The two major themes identified were: Supporting parents' learning in correctional settings; and providers' learning about parent education in correctional settings. Each theme had several sub-themes (Table 1).

Table 1. Themes and sub-themes

Supporting parents' learning in correctional settings	Engage rather than alienate
	Build on strengths and relationships
	Deliver culturally appropriate education
Providers' learning about parent education in correctional settings	Challenges and rewards
	Insights as educators

Supporting parents' learning in correctional settings

Many incarcerated parents have limited positive experiences with the education system and may actively avoid involvement in education due to the fear of failure and humiliation. Supporting these parents to learn was identified as a complex and multi-faceted phenomenon, with three sub-themes: engage rather than alienate; build on strengths and relationship; and deliver culturally appropriate education. Each sub-theme is discussed in detail below, illustrated by typical extracts from the respondent interviews.

Engage rather than alienate

Respondents provided insights into the contextual factors that could influence the learning environment for people in the correctional system. These included limited education levels and threats to learning ability that could be compromised due to a range of issues including cultural beliefs about parenting,

cognitive impairment due to drug and alcohol misuse, mental illness, limited schooling, and a distrust of learning environments due to negative childhood experiences of school. The facilitators' challenge was to develop learning opportunities that engage rather than alienate the parents, in order for them to benefit from the learning opportunity in parenting programs. Respondents highlighted prisoners' limited exposure as children to responsive and sensitive parenting as a further barrier.

Given these learning challenges, and out of a desire to meet the needs of all participating prisoners, respondents identified that learning activities require a creative, rather than theoretical or didactic approach.

> They might say [their education level], 'oh it isn't great'. They'll probably click more with visual discussion, hands on, drawings, you know? There are times when we spoke about hopes and dreams and I thought, well they're not going to write anything. So I grabbed the A3 and put the pens and colouring pencils out. I said, 'alright, draw the hopes and dreams'. That's how we got them involved and motivated, yeah. (Respondent 9)

> … you've got to think on your feet and you've got to be creative. I just think that DVD, and I'm sure there are other DVDs out there, allows for that visual [understanding]. (Respondent 9)

> The craft activity components are particularly nice in this environment because the women do those things without their children around and then you often see them being a little more creative about the way they engage and play with their children (Respondent 11)

Common concerns among respondents were prisoners' limited understanding and skills in basic parenting behaviours such as the ability to play with a child. The following respondent pinpoints making learning meaningful for the parents by identifying the learning needs of the group. She noted that some incarcerated parents do not have a history or experience of childhood play to draw on,

reflecting how they were parented. This lack of childhood experience meant that providing the opportunity to play was very important.

> So … establishing from the beginning what do they need around the practical learning situation, but also things like playing. A lot of the women don't have much of an understanding of play, because for many of these women their own experiences of being parented were very problematic, very limited so they may not have histories of play to draw on. You know – taking the child to the park and what do I do if I take the child to the park? What am I supposed to do with that child if we are stuck at home and it's raining and I don't know what to do and I don't have any money – because there is often a sense of needing to buy things for kids – so what do I do when I don't have any money? Just play, just general – what does play look like for kids, what do they need, what does labelled play look like? Just generally how to engage when you don't have a history of that yourself. (Respondent 11)

This respondent described the many components of play that incarcerated parents have not learnt or had reinforced during their own childhood. Incarcerated parents can lack understanding that would enable them as adults to engage their children in play. The "*sense of needing to buy things for kids"* raises the issue that many incarcerated parents equate play with expensive equipment and toys, rather than realising that play is principally about connection and does not need to be costly.

Respondents reported that many incarcerated parents find communicating verbally with their children in an effective manner challenging. They identified aspects of parenting education and support programs that actively foster the development of communication skills. For example, parents can read to their child by compiling a digital recording of them reading a book which is then sent to the child. In the craft component of the MAAD parenting program, mothers make a book that can be read to the child when visiting or sent to the child as a gift.

> The other thing they really liked is learning how to read to their children. Now it's the communication part again but [also] active listening and praise. I think that the program looks at that: what was said to you that was positive and what would you say to your children now? [We explain] to them how praise works so much better [than criticism] because children come not knowing what's right and wrong. That we are here to teach them. I think that was it – particularly the videos, [they] loved the videos [on] active listening, praise, descriptive praise and there's one about getting to know you, about when a child is first born and how they communicate. (Respondent 12)

A particular challenge for some incarcerated parents is their poor reading and literacy skills. Using strategies such as making a book where the parents can use drawings and pictures from magazines as a substitute for words, making storytelling easier for the parent. These activities have the potential to motivate the parents to participate in the prison literacy programs. The respondent continues by describing ways she worked with incarcerated parents, using videos to assist them reflect on and practise their communication skills and behaviour. This helps address the challenge of supporting the mothers to communicate in a pro-social rather than in a punitive manner.

The respondents regularly mentioned creating opportunities to model appropriate behaviour and provide teaching opportunities.

> We have fruit mornings, so I'll go out and get a heap of fruit through petty cash ... When we have [not-for-profit organisation], when they come in … they have the activity in here and we'll have the fruit and we talk about what sort of fruits you should be eating instead of having lollies – this is better for you and tastes just as nice. And the mums, we do facilitate a bit of a group, especially the new mums, about nutrition because they have to keep their nutrition up as well as the children, so we touch on all of that. It's great (Respondent 8)

Respondents highlighted the need to carefully consider the learning

environment, given its potential to trigger memories either of past trauma and failure for the learners, or of achievement and acceptance.

> The other thing that we did that I think was the biggest hit was that we tried to avoid as much as possible making it feel like school, because a lot of these women found school very difficult and so some of the activities we would do would be around a kitchen table or be craft activities that were just about making a jigsaw puzzle for their child or a picture frame that they could decorate. They were only paper or cardboard but it didn't matter and the women really enjoyed doing that. But the bonus … was that there were often conversations going on and the facilitator was there and probing and doing things as well to expand what the women were saying and providing opportunistic learning. (Respondent 10)

One program facilitator described connecting with the prisoners during the sessions.

> [The prisoners say] 'we like sitting, talking to you'. Because you've got the session already there but you break it down in such a way that they can understand it and we can have a good yarn about it. (Respondent 2)

Respondents highlighted how prisoners refer to the learning process as a naturally-occurring conversation, enabling them to draw on their own experiences and knowledge. In this type of learning space the facilitator plays an active role in engaging the prisoners to expand their knowledge through such things as having *"a good yarn",* and supporting opportunistic learning.

Build on strengths and relationships

A key feature of the two parenting programs was their focus on parenting strengths and relationship development rather than on parenting deficits. One respondent described the MAAD program's focus on acknowledging and nurturing the participants' own knowledge about their children.

> We wanted the mothers to feel that they did have some knowledge of their children and that helped not having to have parenting expertise having a health professional in it. For example … when we were talking about [child] development we would do an exercise on the whiteboard where we would list the ages and the facilitator would say 'okay who has a two month old baby and who's got a three year old?' And we ask them what makes them the expert on that phase and what their three year old was doing and the others would help and we would adjust it. (Respondent 10)

Using the prisoners' experiences of their own children's growth and development clearly assisted the facilitators to bring out the mothers' often hidden or unconscious knowledge or expertise. This co-production approach allowed others to fill in any knowledge gaps. The next quote illustrates the importance of taking care not to reinforce faulty or unsafe information during these sessions.

> … Getting them to bring out their knowledge because I think that was really useful and a lot of the women I don't think recognise that they have knowledge of their children or about parenting. I'm sure lots of the knowledge they had was quite dysfunctional knowledge but amongst that there were some little gems that you could really tease out with the women and say 'that's really terrific and this is how you can build on it'. And that was really precious for some of them I think. (Respondent 10)

Identifying strengths through the craft activities was often surprising for the women and the facilitator. This enabled the women to receive praise and develop a sense of satisfaction that they may never have experienced before. It also developed cohesion within the group and motivated them to pursue newly-acknowledged skills.

> One of the inmates drew that picture of her child [points to pinboard]. She did that within about half an hour. It's magnificent, and that's baby there and that's the mum. Beautiful little baby. She has not had training, you know

> when we found out she could draw like that in some of the groups and things we were just so wow and encouraged that. So I think once you find out what a women's strengths are, if you can bring that into your groups, it's a lot more satisfying for them as well. (Respondent 3)

Respondents indicated that building on existing knowledge and strengths is significant for many program participants. The facilitators require specific skills to guide the prisoners about safe parenting practices while still encouraging their contributions to the group.

Deliver culturally appropriate education

Providing culturally appropriate education was a concern for the respondents. Many NSW prisoners are Indigenous, yet there are few educational resources that focus on Indigenous beliefs and parenting behaviours that the prisoners are able to relate to in their own family life.

> It shows a setting of a father, a dad, with three of his children, struggling around each of these in the different segments. As Kooris, they say, 'why aren't there any Aboriginal fellows? Why isn't this an Aboriginal setting?' So they pick it up straight away and I say, 'look past the colour of the skin and just look at what's been presented'. So some of them do it easy. Others find it hard and you have to try and encourage, you know. (Respondent 9)

> They loved them [videos]. [Do they have Aboriginal actors in them?] No. I say to the girls, 'sorry, they're very middle class some of these women but the message is what's important here'. (Respondent 12)

These quotes illustrate the challenge for facilitators when culturally appropriate resources are limited. They must find creative ways to encourage prisoners to look beyond the visual appearance of the teaching resources to the underlying parenting principles. [Organisation] endeavours to employ Aboriginal gender-specific facilitators to deliver Aboriginal parenting programs. However, the following quote challenges the idea that only Aboriginal men can run programs

for men; the respondent identifies the value of also involving Aboriginal women facilitators in presenting important parenting messages.

> The other thing I find about this program that is extremely powerful … when I trained Aboriginal staff members, I said, 'no it's only for men'. We didn't get too many Aboriginal men to start off with and I said, 'look, open it up and we'll train up the Aboriginal women as well'. I'm glad we did. … Because I find an Aboriginal women's voice, especially around that violence area, extremely powerful. Extremely powerful because when a woman talks and says, you know, 'we all go through the stages of lust, love and wanting' – and when a woman talks like that and she says, you know, 'at the end of the day, no woman is put on this here planet to be any man's punching bag', it's more powerful from a woman. (Respondent 15)

Art activities were reported as a significant way for incarcerated Indigenous parents to maintain connection with their children and pass on cultural and family information. Respondents highlighted that assistance with communicating was a crucial cultural outcome of art activities.

> We have quite a number of Aboriginal women that do participate in that program and I think particularly one of the focuses that they get is they do a lot of artwork and it gives them an opportunity to be able to tell their story and their history and their family history and their heritage through their artwork which they then can also pass those stories onto their children. So I think that helps develop those communication skills a lot better for them as well. Given that they are supposed to be the storytellers of passing that information on to their children, it just gives them a different way of passing that information on. And they do actively participate at a very high level. (Respondent 7)

Storytelling or "yarning" is a central approach in both the programs. The parents are receptive to the use of stories as it is a traditional method of passing on information.

The programs aimed to create an awareness of the impact of the prisoners' behaviour on their families. The use of music as a means of raising confronting issues was identified as being culturally appropriate.

> I get them to think about their actions, especially around domestic violence. There's a song I play and it's called Looking Back. When they hear that song - I said, 'if there's one word that you could sum up as to what that song is all about, what would it be?' More times than not, they'll say, 'regret'. (Respondent 9)

Through this song the respondent is facilitating the parents to examine their feelings and behaviour. This can often be difficult to raise confronting issues without parents feeling accused or judged by the facilitator or other program participants. Using music encourages the participants to discuss, in this case, regrets in their lives in possibly a less confronting and gentler manner. This approach has the potential to engage the parent where other less subtle approaches may result in the parent withdrawing.

Providers' learning about parent education in correctional settings

Formal program evaluations rarely describe the subtle but often meaningful impact on the participants that may demonstrate significant learning has occurred, and the educational skills used to achieve these outcomes. By sharing their observations, respondents help foreground these impacts, based on their insider knowledge about program participants and the insights they have gained in practice. Within the theme of Providers' Learning, there were two subthemes: challenges and rewards; and Insights as educators. Both subthemes reflect the skilful and respectful approach the facilitators use to work with the parents.

Challenges and rewards

The respondents described the challenges and rewards they experienced working with the parents, and how this stimulated their own learning. They provided numerous examples of the various challenges they encountered and

the subtle but significant changes in the participants' behaviour and knowledge. Importantly, they demonstrated developing approaches to enhance the parents' learning. The first respondent describes the need to change behaviour. The facilitator respectfully challenges the father enabling the parent to reflect on their belief about 'what great dads do'. The potential outcome is the development of insight into their parenting behaviour.

> He thought he was a great dad because he had a car and his kids never went without. I go, 'but they do'. I said, 'their emotional and psychological stability and growth is just as important as the material things'. (Respondent 9)

Respondents frequently identified challenging participants' beliefs and behaviours by providing a counter argument and offering other ways of thinking about being a parent. Further, this respondent describes the changes in physical behaviour required to enable active participation in the group and possibly for learning to occur.

> One woman … started off with virtually no contact, the baseball cap never came off her head and towards the end it was almost like a visible transformation of her feelings much more optimistic and knowledgeable and having more understanding of what she needed to do for the future. You could physically see that in her. Even with the amount of eye contact and was prepared to offer over the course you know the four days that we run the program. (Respondent 5)

The respondent had provided this example of the mother's increasing engagement with a sense of achievement and delight.

Respondents identified the purpose of working with the parents as developing their sense of self-worth through building on their parenting strengths. This strengthening of self-worth was a common focus throughout the interviews. A constant thread throughout the interviews was that the end point for everyone involved is for the children to thrive.

> They think they are not worthy a lot of the time as well and that's why some go back to what they were doing before they came in here. But if we can build their strengths through programs and through everything that we are doing, and through their child thriving you know if we can build up that, then we have done our job in the end (Respondent 8)

Respondent 8 recognises the major challenge of reinforcing the parents' strengths in order for their behaviour to change. Respondents reflected their sense of achievement when they perceived changes in prisoners' behaviour and attitudes. One respondent illustrated the rewards of tangible changes to participants' behaviour, crediting parenting programs as a significant catalyst for change.

> … a woman who after the program came back to them and the DOCS workers had come back to the welfare officers and prison officers and said 'she is so much easier to communicate with - she doesn't yell at us anymore' because we helped them [the mothers] sort of learn some communication skills and they were applying them. (Respondent 10)

This respondent provided a second example of how educators contributed to a mother's learning how her behaviour impacted on others, especially her children.

> … she had learned that [if] she had … thrown a tantrum at visiting time she would have been in trouble but also that it would have upset the children and so she thought this was a much better way to do it (Respondent 10)

This mother's behaviour demonstrates the ability to transfer the classroom learning into day-to-day life. Importantly, the mother is able to think of her children's needs and the impact of her actions. A key outcome of parenting programs is to change the prisoners' understanding about their roles as parents and how they interact with their children.

> I do know that the women do get quite significantly involved in the program – they do get a lot out of the program. And they do feel that they have benefited greatly from the structure of the program and the content of the program. And it does, it changes their perspective on how they actually interact with their children. (Respondent 3)

A common thread through the interviews was respondents' recognition of their role in increasing parents' understanding of their parenting role. They provided many examples of the challenges they encountered, and the outcomes and rewards of facilitating the parents' learning of new non-confrontational approaches for behaviour management and communication.

Insights as educators

Respondents clearly demonstrated the insights they developed through their interaction with the parents and their perceptions of how parenting attitudes had changed. These insights indicate that the parenting education content is often very different from the program participants' own experience of being parented and parenting their own children. Through the respondents' reflections they ascertained that the parents started to use more relational skills in their parenting which is a key component of both programs. Their comments reveal their insights into the education process as they purposefully evaluate their practice and their role in parents' learning.

> After the programs completed … it changed how they view their interactions with their children compared to their previous behaviours… I think they tend to view their interactions with their children at a much different level and appreciate … their contact and things like that. And just how they do things is very much different after they have done the program I think, and a lot of their contact through their mail service and things along those lines change as well (Respondent 3)

In the above quote the respondent not only recognised increased awareness but also observed parents' changing physical interactions with their children.

Recognising the value of experiential education, respondents regularly identified a significant deficit in the programs: the participants' limited ability to put into practice the parenting knowledge and skills they were learning:

> The women have an opportunity to talk about things but they are not able to, like if you were at home and participating in a program you're able to go home and practise the things or implement the things that you're talking about. So for the women it's taking things away in this abnormal environment and trying to play around with the stuff that they are learning (Respondent 11)

Respondents clearly learnt that enabling parents to put into practice their new or enhanced knowledge and skills was crucial to ensure that the learning was not lost and that parents would not revert to their previous default ways of parenting and communicating with their children and others.

DISCUSSION

The longer-term effectiveness of prison-based parenting education programs is uncertain but there are some promising results (Garzarelli 2011; Wilson et al. 2010; Loper and Tuerk 2006; Bronte-Tinkew et al. 2012). In this study, the respondents identified subtle but important changes in the parents' knowledge and behaviours and in their capacity as educators in a challenging learning environment. While not part of a formal program evaluation process, the respondent perspectives contribute evidence of the effectiveness and value of the two parenting programs that were the focus of the wider study. Importantly, the respondents demonstrated educational strategies they used to create appropriate learning situations that engage parents through culturally appropriate activities, with a focus on parental strengths and building relationships. Facilitators and other educators' experiences and observations are often absent from studies of parenting programs for incarcerated mothers and fathers. Yet they provide a crucial contribution to understanding how

participants achieve the program learning outcomes and how to work effectively with parents who are incarcerated or extremely vulnerable.

A significant aim of these parenting programs was to assist parents build on their existing knowledge and adapt it for their situation. While respondents did not specifically mention the term 'co-production', their reflections illustrated that this was the approach used. For example, programs focused on parents' strengths, their knowledge of their children, and their creation of artworks which all encouraged the parents to talk about their histories and families and to focus on parenting. A co-productive approach supports the joint construction of knowledge (Slay and Robinson 2011) that clearly signals to parents that they have valuable insight about their children and parenting context. There is a relational foundation to a co-production approach (Dunston et al. 2009). It has significant benefits of modeling behaviour to parents for use with their children, because it transforms the learner from recipient to co-producer of knowledge and facilitates learning (Athakkakath, Al-Maskari and Kumudha 2015). This transformational approach facilitates the parents' confidence to continue to build on these strengths. As this is not a one-sided approach, it potentially assists facilitators to rethink their attitudes, identify 'real world' solutions and ways to use the organisation's resources more creatively to work more effectively with incarcerated parents.

While acknowledging the learning challenges of some parents and their unfamiliarity with participating in group learning the facilitators used creative and informal methods as catalysts for learning and to overcome previous negative education experiences. Craft and other sensory activity (e.g. music or videos) were used to trigger and guide the direction of the conversations. This is especially appropriate for Aboriginal participants as storytelling is a familiar way to share knowledge and support learning (Walker et al. 2014). Through craft activities, 'yarning' and the conversations that occurred, the respondents perceived that parents became engaged with the parenting program and contributed by sharing parenting experiences and their knowledge about children. The context of learning is changed from a formal group approach to a

more relaxed and conversational approach with facilitators and parents co-contributing to the parent education sessions (Slay and Robinson 2011).

Overall the study respondents spoke with genuine concern for the incarcerated parents and expressed delight in the positive changes they had observed in the parents' behaviour or understanding. They recognised that many of the prisoners had been exposed to abusive parenting and lacked a parental model that was sensitive and appropriate. Identified changes in prisoners' parenting behaviour and attitudes as outcomes of the parenting programs reinforce the potential for the use of parenting programs to enact behaviour change that form the basis for pro-social parenting.

Not all comments about the provision of parenting programs were positive. The participants identified areas for improvement. A common concern was the lack of culturally appropriate program content and resources. This tension was not only about the mismatch with the Aboriginal parents. Most parents in these programs had not experienced the stable family lives that are portrayed in many parent education resources. Even though the facilitators were able to encourage participants to focus on the underlying message, the visual impact was absent. Acknowledging the complexity of incarcerated parents' lives and providing meaningful activities and resources will increase parents' ability to relate and make meaningful connections to their family context and culture that in turn influences their parenting (Child Welfare Information Gateway 2013).

A major short-coming of the parenting programs is the difficulty for many incarcerated parents to practise their newly-gained knowledge and skills with their children, due to limited or no access visits, or the uncomfortable or forbidding environments in which visits do take place. This lack of opportunity to regularly practise their parenting skills in authentic and safe situations does not allow for reinforcement and consolidation of knowledge (Fowler et al. 2017; Rossiter et al. 2015). The respondents indicated that providing parent education and support would facilitate incarcerated parents' contact with their children, give them a positive strategy to assist in communication with their children and

strengthen post-release reunification with their families (Celinska and Siegal 2010; Geller 2013; Geller et al. 2009). Increasing regular contact between the parents and children will enable the effective transfer and consolidation of parenting knowledge and skills.

Strengths and limitations

This study focused on individuals involved in developing and delivering two parenting education programs for incarcerated parents and their comments may have limited significance to other programs or other jurisdictions. However, the data highlights challenges in parenting education that are likely widespread, if not universal in this context.

Using respondents' observations as data gives only limited evidence about the effectiveness of custodial education programs. As noted, this study was not a formal evaluation of program outcomes. However, by exploring the perspectives of educators, it provides a rare insight into the dynamics and complexities of working with a vulnerable population in a challenging educational setting.

Concluding remarks

The inclusion of the facilitators' and stakeholders' experiences and knowledge, derived from their practice in providing parenting programs, is an important underpinning of this research study. Delivering parenting education within a correctional setting is challenging for practical and pedagogical reasons. The participating parents frequently lack experience of being nurtured as children or having satisfactory parenting role models. Most have had negative experiences of education.

Many examples provided by the respondents reflect a co-productive approach to supporting the parents' learning. For many of the parents it may be their first experience of this type of educational approach. Facilitators create opportunities and use existing knowledge to contribute to the group learning activities. A respectful relationship is built between the facilitators and the parents, enabling

educators to foreground parents' existing knowledge while being able to uncover misconceptions and potentially dangerous parenting practices.

In order to break the intergenerational cycle of inadequate and/or abusive parenting and the resultant sequelae, it is crucial that mothers and fathers in prison have access to programs to assist them in their parenting. However, learning to parent sensitively and safely is difficult for adults with childhood experiences of abuse and neglect, requiring significant support and exposure to alternative parenting approaches through parenting education.

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