



"Breaking Barriers with Books": Connecting Incarcerated Fathers with Their Children

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ABSTRACT:

This paper describes "Breaking Barriers with Books," an innovative and successful intergenerational prison literacy and reading program which has been active for fourteen years at the Oshkosh Correctional Institution in the state of Wisconsin, USA. It describes the theoretical framework for the program, developed in 1995 by Dr. Margaret Genisio, a University of Wisconsin professor of reading, as well as the various components of the program. The paper includes samples of writings by inmate fathers who have participated in the program, as well as testimony from them on the importance of this book sharing program for themselves and their children. Information is also included on other prison reading and literacy programs, and the author highlights the many factors that contribute to the success of this program.

How *Breaking Barriers with Books* Began

In 1996, something new and exciting stirred the interest and curiosity of many inmates at the large, medium-security Oshkosh Correctional Institution (OSCI) in the state of Wisconsin: Some men had been seen walking around with colorful children's books, some actually reading aloud, gesturing and making funny faces! The word spread quickly that these men had signed up for "*Breaking Barriers with Books*" (*BBWB*), which was now a full-scale program after a successful trial run the previous year with a small group of inmate volunteers. The men carrying the children's books were anxious to learn more about bonding with their children through reading aloud activities and discussing books with their children.

It took some courage for these inmates to sign up for this "children's" program in the all-male prison atmosphere, where it is all important to project a tough and strong image. And most of these inmate fathers had not been exposed to children's literature before and had no idea of what was involved in read aloud activities.

"Freddy" Jackson signed up but was not immediately convinced that this program would work for him – after all, nobody read to him when he was growing up. So for the first few weeks of the five-week class (a mandatory component) he did not say a word. "It was my macho image, of course," he said, but admitted that then "I broke down my false pride." He went on to make several videotapes for his two children of himself reading a series of children's books. The videos were sent to his children who lived too far away to come and visit him – along with poignant poems and letters. "I will always love you, a love that is deep and true, You are a gift from God, and this is my gift to you" are some of his words. He also talks to his children on the phone about what they are reading. "This program has taught me that I finally have to stand up and be what a man has to be, and that's a real father to his children," Jackson said

And when Chris Price for the first time sat his young son on his lap and read him a story, it was one of the first times he felt the joy of fatherhood. "When he walked away from me that day after we had read, I had tears in my eyes," Price said. "Now we talk about reading all the time and I dream about the day we can maybe take a ride in the country and find a quiet place to just sit and read books together."

Today, thirteen years later, BBWB is still going strong at the OSCI prison, and hundreds of inmates have participated at that one facility. The program has been so successful that it was introduced in almost all the other prisons in the state (sometimes in a slightly different form) and has served as a model for similar programs in many other states in the United States. Inquiries have also been received from foreign countries through the International Correctional Education Association.

The need for a program like BBWB is obvious when we look at a few sobering numbers:

- Almost 2.5 million American children have a parent in jail or prison.
- Three of every hundred American children have a parent behind bars.

These children bear the costs of their parents' crimes. Many are raised by a grandparent who is elderly and often struggling financially. Often the children fall into the bureaucratic maze or shuttle between foster homes. Many incarcerated parents – both mothers and fathers – loose custody of their children, and many of them may not have been model parents to begin with, due to factors such as substance abuse, economic problems, low education, domestic violence, etc.

Serving a prison sentence, ironically enough, often presents these parents with the first opportunity to obtain sound parenting information and skills, to go to school, to read, and to reflect on their family ties. Numerous studies show a positive correlation between healthy family ties and reduced recidivism. The BBWB program offers inmate fathers an opportunity to build or rebuild family relationships outside prison. In this respect, as well as in others, incarceration presents the inmate with the motivation and resources to turn his/her life around - in other words - a new beginning.

BBWB was developed by Margaret Genisio, a University of Wisconsin-Oshkosh associate professor of reading, who has since gained national attention because of the program's success. "Reading and literacy is my specialty, and I had an idea to use those things to teach fathers how to be better parents," Genisio said. "Many of the men in prison have never been taught the importance of bonding with their kids and how important it is to read with them. If children start reading very early, it becomes part of a routine," Genisio said. "And if parents can model it, that's very, very powerful. In the corrections system, it crafts a very positive memory between father and child, when they may not have many memories otherwise." "Instead of simply having the children come into the visiting room and jump around, these men are reading and having some great sharing time with their children," she added. "They are also developing a relationship that will last when they get out of prison."

It is interesting to note that when Genisio initially became interested in developing a prison literacy program, she was focusing on improving the literacy skills of the inmates only. But after observing prison life for six months, she realized that the inmate fathers needed help relating to their children, that they "needed a catalyst to make memories and have conversations, something to keep the interaction going." And thus the child centered components were incorporated into a broad, multifaceted, intergenerational reading and literacy program.

The evaluation of the early pilot program had identified many positive outcomes, among others:

- Increased attendance and participation in family visits by the inmates' children,
- The production of an inmate in-house publication for children,
- More focused parenting during and after participation, evidenced by self-directed book sharing and continuing parent meetings,
- Increased interest in and request for information about children's literature.

These positive outcomes helped establish BBWB as an effective permanent correctional program and were instrumental in obtaining both start-up and continuous funding.

Another important factor during the initial planning and implementation of BBWB was the close cooperative relationship that developed between Margaret Genisio, the university, and the OSCI prison administration and staff. Without this support and goodwill from both sides, the program would never have succeeded. It is not easy for "outsiders" to introduce new program ideas into a prison environment, but the OSCI prison has from its first days in 1986 been a model for progressive thinking and innovative approaches to education and rehabilitation. This new intergenerational literacy program, with its parenting components, was fully supported by all the institution stakeholders, including the warden, the teachers, education director, library staff, social workers, treatment staff, the uniformed security staff and, of course, the inmate fathers themselves. Jessica Fitzpatrick, an author who is currently writing a book about the most successful long-lived literacy programs funded by the Barbara Bush Foundation, says about the OSCI program: "This prison is very forward thinking. They are thinking about the men in prison, and they are also thinking about the man's children. That is forward thinking."

In 1997, the university honored Margaret Genisio's prison work by giving her the Distinguished Teacher of the Year Award, and in 1996 the program received a \$20,000

grant from the Barbara Bush Foundation for Family Literacy. This start-up money was used to purchase the initial collection of quality children's literature and to acquire videotaping equipment at the OSCI prison. Additional funding was granted by the university. And when the grant money ran out, the OSCI prison took over full funding and staffing of the program.

Structure and Components of *Breaking Barriers with Books*

The main purpose of BBWB is to prevent at-risk children from experiencing weakening paternal bonding during stressful periods (like the incarceration of a parent), while creating positive memory building experiences using intergenerational literature sharing as the medium, and to focus on the use of literature to strengthen family ties. Related purposes are to teach the habit of reading to the children and to expose them to the joy of reading as a life-long experience.

The five broad program goals are:

- 1) To provide the child with the opportunity to enjoy literature with his/her father in much the same way as one would at home.
- 2) To provide the child with the opportunity to strengthen the bond with his/her father and build positive memories.
- 3) To enhance paternal empowerment by providing fathers with a strong information base to use in book sharing and other positive parent/child activities.
- 4) To provide the inmates with a model for a father's support group, lead by fathers, which can be replicated in the future outside the prison.
- 5) To increase the literacy skills of both fathers and children, leading to greater reading enjoyment.

The program is designed to run in seven 5-week cycles per year. Each cycle has 10 – 15 inmate participants. Each cycle contains the following components, all related to the above stated goals:

- 1) Class/workshop for inmate fathers: a total of ten hours delivered at two-hour segments for five weeks. The instruction is provided by the institution librarian and/or institution teachers.
- 2) Selection by the fathers of books to read with their children & practice in reading these books.
- 3) Videotaping reading sessions by those fathers whose children cannot visit in person.
- 4) Parent/child interaction: a total of five hours (one hour weekly) of staff supervised/staff coached reading activities between father and child.
- 5) Journal writing by inmate fathers about their parenting experiences, reading activities during visits, thoughts and feelings about participating in BBWB, etc.
- 6) Production in-house of a children's book.
- 7) Fathers' support group meetings.

During the formal class hours and workshops, the instructor models book sharing sessions and examines a multitude of outstanding children's literature. Elements of child psychology and child development are included as they relate to the selection of age appropriate titles. Fathers are provided with information about being a positive reading

role model and supporter of their child's literacy from the emerging stage through elementary school levels.

Specific features about the available BBWB books are discussed, as well as ways of creating "extension" activities to accompany each book. The participants view a video of an African-American father reading and discussing a book with his four-year old daughter, and the fathers get a study guide that focuses on interpretation of text, tying text to personal experiences, linking it with other texts, explaining or highlighting passages, making predictions of outcomes, and developing book-related activities, including singing songs, and making drawings, collages, clay figures, etc. Each father then selects a book and, in cooperation with the other fathers and the instructor, plans a reading session with his child.

Other elements of the class/workshop include how to write various types of poems and keeping a personal journal. The fathers are also given suggestions for composing a prescriptive writing piece to be included in the in-house created children's book, which will be given to the children of each of the fathers.

With the knowledge and skills acquired in class, the inmate fathers are now ready to share books with their children in the visiting room. Each of the participants is given an extra hour per week for book sharing, and a separate area is set aside for this activity. The visiting room has a separate collection of children's books and, over the years, OSCI and the other institutions' visiting areas were able to also acquire children's games, as well as children's furniture and colorful wall decorations. The child's mother or other accompanying adult is welcome to participate in the sharing, although the father leads the activity. Children may take books home to continue reading during the week but are expected to return the books at their next visit.

When BBWB began at OSCI, the librarian, who was also a certified elementary school teacher, selected the initial children's collection in cooperation with Margaret Genisio. As the program evolved, some of the prison teachers became involved with the book selection. Today they obtain many of the new titles through a network of donors from the outside. The inmate fathers often make suggestions, recalling some favorite story or book from their own childhood. An attempt is made to obtain multiple copies of these books, so that the prison library has at least one copy for check-out by the fathers and another copy for the visiting room. The collection consists of several thousand items and includes a wide variety of multicultural books, from tactile baby's books to titles for young adolescents, including poetry. The collection also contains a considerable number of books in Spanish. A security officer keeps track of the book usage in the visiting room. The book collection in the visiting room may be used by all children during visits, not just by the BBWB participants.

Some fathers videotape themselves reading books to their children who are unable to come for a visit, due to distance or conflicting schedules. These taping sessions are always supervised by a staff member, to make sure that no "inappropriate" language or behavior is displayed (e.g. the flashing of gang symbols). The father is expected to prepare for the taping and to not only read the book, but also talk about its features as he turns the pages. Inmates are allowed to wear funny hats or clothing accessories which they create themselves and which relate to the book (e.g. The Cat in the Hat by Dr. Seuss). Today, digital video cameras are used, and DVDs have replaced the videotapes. The DVDs are sent home with a copy of the book so that the child can watch the video

while reading. The books must be returned to the institution after two weeks, but the child may keep the DVD, for which the father has paid several dollars (to cover mailing costs).

In the early days of BBWB, an added bonus for the children was included: The American Girl Company, founded in Wisconsin, donated hundreds of its expensive and popular dolls to OSCI, and the inmate fathers in the program were allowed to pick one doll to give to their child as a birthday or Christmas gift. Needless to say, these gifts were very popular!

The BBWB fathers are required to keep a journal throughout the program, and they are encouraged to continue to do so after their participation. The writing is interactive between the inmate father and the instructor. The fathers are provided with two blank journals and are asked to include their reflections about the program and their interaction with their children during the course of the week. They are also given examples of things to write about, like memorable times, funny incidents involving the children, what they enjoy about being fathers, places they would like to go with their children, favorite books, etc. One journal is given to the instructor each week, while the father continues writing in the other. The instructor journals back and comments on the entries, and the content is used both for program evaluation and as source material for the in-house produced children's book.

There are actually two versions of this book. One cooperative version contains samples of entries from all the fathers, (poems, letters, journal excerpts, essays, drawings, and pictures), and the other version is individualized by each father for his child, and the child receives this book as a gift. The fathers have access to a computer lab with word processing and graphics software, and the quality of these self-created books is very high. The content is very personal and emotionally sincere. Some samples show the level of insight gained during the program and the fact that parental love survives even over distances and long absences:

Earlier today I had the chance to tape my very first reading session. In the beginning I was sort of nervous. Nervous of how I would sound. Or maybe tripping over elementary words & how I would look on camera, & believe me, it probably showed. But as I began to read the first book, a book that I pre-read for preparedness, I found myself entering this comfort zone & I started to really get into it. As I dipped into one funny character after another demonstrating much enthusiasm, I held back burst of laughter imagining how silly my son would think I am once he sees this. And I had to try even harder to hold back tears; just knowing how proud he would be, of his daddy, once he does see this. This experience has not only aroused my imagination to heights that I never, well, imagined, but it has also inspired me to continue my journey of reading on my own. And I can't wait to get back in front of that camera for my 2nd session. (Journal entry by Rumont Kirkpatrick).

A father's "personal portrait":

*Once I was stuck in time,
Now I am moving in life.*

*Once I lost myself,
But then I found a new way in life.*

*If I could have one wish, it would be
To be free of my old ways.*

*If I could change the world,
I would set people free on the inside.*

*Once I couldn't look at myself,
But now you should see me succeed.*

*I used to feel down,
But now I know I have a new beginning.*

*The one thing I learned is
Stop and think first.*

*Once I was weak in spirit,
But now I am strong-willed and have peace of mind.*

Dennis Draves (Dad)

And a father's "biopoem" about his daughter:

*Chelsea
Princess, cute, sweet, smart, loving,
Daughter of Shawn and Ida Rae.
Lover of school, candy, Mommy & Daddy, and looking pretty.
Who feels happy, hungry anytime, and clumsy.
Who fears being without Daddy, missing play time, and getting bad grades.
Who gives joy, love, and happiness to whoever is around.
Who would like to see Daddy, Daddy, and more of her Daddy.
Born in Kenosha, Wisconsin*

Darnell Thomas

The men participating in BBWB meet weekly as a fathers' support group. Much of the planning and writing for the in-house book take place during these group meetings. The fathers elect a group leader and editors for the book, but cooperation and consensus are strongly encouraged. Discussion about the program in general may also be on the agenda, as well as how to cope with child and family related issues. As BBWB is evolving over the years and is being introduced in other Wisconsin prisons, the main focus of the support group has become the book production. The teacher currently managing the program at OSCI emphasizes that one of the added benefits of the book project, besides the publication itself, is learning teamwork, compromise, and patience.

How are Inmate Fathers Selected for Participation in *Breaking Barriers with Books*?

Inmates who are interested in participation must be fathers of children ages 3 through 12 years, and the children must be on the father's approved visitors list. Each father is limited to having three children included. Each father must complete a written application form that is screened by security and education staff. Brochures about the program are available throughout the institution, but word of mouth is the most effective advertisement. BBWB is a very popular program and has a long waiting list.

Inmates who have been convicted of a sex crime against a child are not eligible, and only those sex offenders who have completed a long sex offender treatment program can apply. And each inmate's particular situation is closely examined.

Fathers may be dismissed from the program if they do not follow program or visiting room rules, and they must be able to control their children's behavior.

Other Intergenerational Reading and Literacy Programs in Wisconsin Prisons

While BBWB was the first child-focused reading program to be introduced in the state correctional institutions, other similar or related programs have since been introduced. It often takes one very successful program to prove itself, before other sites follow. Word about the OSCI program quickly got out to teachers, librarians, education directors, and wardens at other sites, some of which already had active one-on-one inmate literacy tutoring programs, adult basic education, and parenting classes. The BBWB model was seen as a logical enhancement to existing programs, and new "Fathers Sharing Books" programs were established -- with or without all the components of the original BBWB model.

Some of the correctional teachers have received training by Motheread/Fatheread Inc., a nationally acclaimed private, non-profit organization that combines the teaching of literacy skills with child development and family empowerment issues. Parents and children learn to use the power of language to discover more about themselves, their families, and their communities. MR/FR offers classes for both adults and children. In the adult classes, participants learn to be story readers, writers, and tellers in a group structure that supports their own sense of worth and ability. By teaching the "why" of reading rather than just emphasizing the "how," classes encourage the parents to be reading role models for their children. For children, there is a story exploring component that provides a structured environment for learning reading, critical-thinking, and problem solving skills. To become a MR/FR affiliate, a local organization or institution must have certified staff as facilitators and must meet other rigorous criteria. (More information at www.motheread.org/).

In connection with the MR/FR program, some of the prison teachers and librarians collaborated to obtain grant funding to purchase a series of children's books in multiple copies for inmate parent discussion groups.

Reading is Fundamental (RIF) is another successful reading program in prison, not only in Wisconsin, but in many other states. RIF prepares and motivates children to read by delivering free books and literacy resources to those children and families who need them most. Founded in 1966, RIF is the oldest and largest children's and family nonprofit literacy organization in the United States. RIF's highest priority is reaching underserved children from birth to age 8. RIF provides 4.5 million children with 16 million new, free books and literacy resources each year. All RIF programs combine three essential elements to foster children's literacy: reading motivation, family and community involvement, and the excitement of choosing free books to keep. In Wisconsin, the inmates are allowed to give RIF books as presents to their children, or the books may become part of the visiting room collection.

Advice on Implementing a Book Sharing Program in Prison

Building an effective reading and literacy program on the scale of BBWB inside a correctional setting is challenging. The program must be founded on sound evidence-based research and proven methods. Adapting a program with a proven track record in the general community to the prison environment could be a good start – whether the services are provided by prison staff, an outside library system (public or academic), or by community volunteers.

A strategic planning process is required, and every aspect of the program must be clearly identified, as well as the sequence in which these components are delivered, and the staff members who are responsible for them. It is wise to start on a small scale with a limited pilot project that can be evaluated effectively. Relating the new program to an existing program/service can be a good idea – showing that it will be a logical enhancement or expansion. A budget must also be prepared, not only for one-time startup costs, but also for ongoing operation. With the pilot project results (if positive), it may be easier to obtain funding. A specific person should be designated as program director.

It is extremely important that staff are enthusiastic and commit themselves to the program. Promoting the program to staff is just as important as recruiting the inmate participants. Everybody involved must understand why reading and literacy are important and how the program can benefit the lives of the inmate fathers, their children, their families, and the outside community.

The prison administration must be fully behind the program and must make sure that security staff understand that their cooperation is essential to the success of the program. Some security rules and procedures may have to be changed, which can be difficult to accomplish. Therefore, working with progressive prison administrators who are committed to a rehabilitative philosophy is absolutely essential for the success of the program.

Breaking Barriers with Books is a Clear Winner

There is no better testimony to the success of BBWB than the words of the inmate fathers themselves:

*I've always been a strong believer that a child should learn to read at a very young age, it's fundamental for a child to learn. A book can be his/her best friend. Children learn by example. Believe it or not, a child wants to be like his/her parents. And we as parents have to set those good examples. One way is to show our children that we love to read and take an interest in their reading. Children of today are the adults of tomorrow, and tomorrow is our future. If we lose our children of today, we lose our future..... I would like to give a whole-hearted thank you to the instructors who gave their time for this worthwhile program. **THANK YOU!!!** (Lamont D. McGlown, Sr.)*

And one of the librarians involved in the book sharing experience adds:

[It] has been an affirmative experience for all involved. It has been my great pleasure to work with these men. They are excellent role models for other inmates. The enthusiasm, creativity, and diligence that they have demonstrated are an inspiration. Reaching within, they have reached out to their children through the power of sharing literature. (Mary Vernau)

SOURCES

Todd Chier – Instructor, Oshkosh Correctional Institution;
Margaret Genisio – Associate Professor, University of Wisconsin/Oshkosh;
Ray Gielow - Former Education Director, Oshkosh Correctional Institution;
David Haines – Former Education Director, Oshkosh Correctional Institution;
Judy Smith – Warden, Oshkosh Correctional Institution;
Mary Vernau - Former Librarian, Jackson Correctional Institution;
Betty Yost – Former Librarian, Oshkosh Correctional Institution;
Various newspaper stories, spanning fourteen years;
Personal comments by inmates and quotes from their individual writings.

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