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The Parenting Education Needs of Aboriginal Women Experiencing Incarceration

Abstract

The aim of this study was to listen to the voices of women experiencing incarceration and understand their parenting education needs. This paper reports on data from focus group interviews with 13 Aboriginal women in prison. The data were analysed using reflexive thematic analysis, creating five themes: (1) working towards a positive self; (2) communication (3) parenting from a distance; (4) jumping through hoops to get connected; and (5) connecting with Aboriginal cultures. The women were seeking guidance and clarity about the Child Protection system and how to regain child custody. Many women were wanting to invest in self-care and expressed a need to connect with their community and cultures, suggesting the opportunity to have a yarning circle with their Elders whilst in prison. The majority of women wanted to attend a parenting education program that included Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander women only. The need for a parenting program that will be guided by a trauma-informed approach and utilise reflective practice of 'lived experiences' to develop skills and wisdom was identified as being vitally important to meet the needs of women experiencing incarceration.

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Keywords

Aboriginal women, prison, parenting programs, education, mothers

Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander cultures represent the oldest living cultures globally. The oral history of Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander peoples developed through creation stories (symbolic narrative), art, song and dance which enabled their knowledge of the environment, survival, nutrition, medicine, relationships, and cultures to thrive over hundreds of generations. Development of kinship networks and Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander community mindedness are known strengths (Charles & O'Brien, 2020). However, following invasion, negative effects such as removal of land, exclusionary policies, child removal, systemic racism, socioeconomic disadvantage and limited access to education, housing and health services continue to impact communities (Baldry, 2009; Baldry & Cunneen, 2014; Baldry & McCausland, 2009; Tilton & Anderson, 2017). The Stolen Generations left many Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander children without a parenting role model, exposing them to attachment disorders, trauma, institutionalisation, removing cultural ties and family connections, affecting parenting experience and skill of future generations (Australian Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission, 1997). The number of children forcibly separated from their family during the Stolen Generations has been approximated at one in 10, to one in 3 children across Australia. These numbers may be far greater than represented and are difficult to quantify, due to incomplete and missing records, not recording the person as Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander, differing levels of removal across Australia and some people affected by the Stolen Generations are now deceased (Australian Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission, 1997). The impacts of all these colonial policies and practices, especially the stealing of children, include increasing rates of incarceration and mental health conditions, lack of access to education and health care, and loss of connection with family, community, and cultures. The isolation, distress, and extreme trauma experienced by children who were stolen, has restricted them from parenting freely and expressing love to their children, as they suffered in silence (Tilton & Anderson, 2017). Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander child removal is not limited to the past as these children are grossly over-represented in Child Protection services in the 21st century. Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander children experience out

of home care at a rate more than 10 times that of other Australian children. In South Australia, out of home care affects 75 Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander children per 1000 which is 12 times that of non-Aboriginal children (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare [AIHW], 2020a, p. 53). Data about the children of incarcerated mothers are not routinely collected. One study reported Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander children in Western Australia (aged up to 17 years), between 2003 and 2011, were 27 times more likely to have a mother incarcerated than non-Aboriginal children (Dowell et al., 2017).

Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander women make up 34 percent of women experiencing incarceration in Australia and are imprisoned at a rate 35 times greater than other women in Australia and most are mothers (AIHW, 2019, p. 72). This increasing rate was highlighted 20 years ago, as an 'urgent issue, requiring serious and immediate attention' (Lawrie, 2003, p. 84). Despite recognising the urgent issue, in the seminal study by Lawrie (2003), Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander women are the most rapidly increasing group of incarcerated people today (AIHW, 2020b). This is considered a major human rights and public health concern (Jones et al., 2018; Sullivan et al., 2019).

It was recognised that any effective policy response must understand the experiences, views and needs of Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander women by listening to those women, and to develop programs and policies culturally relevant and gender-specific (Baldry & McCausland, 2009; Geia, 2012; Jones et al., 2018). A recent systematic review determined the need for programs available to suit Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander people released from prison (Abbott et al., 2018). In the current study, the need for a parenting education program was identified by the women, prison staff, Aboriginal leaders within the prison and other key members of the Aboriginal community in South Australia (SA).

Methods

Community engagement

A study including interviews by King and Brown's team with key Aboriginal organisations in SA, found the need for culturally appropriate parenting programs (King &

Brown, 2015). Furthermore, an earlier project titled “Model of Care for Aboriginal Prisoner Health and Wellbeing for South Australia” recommended the provision of parenting education, to maintain parenting skills and focus on recovery and prevention of trauma for Aboriginal women experiencing incarceration (Sivak et al., 2017).

Through collaboration, connections were made with key prison staff. The research proposal was presented to the Aboriginal Support Unit within the DCS; the Council of Aboriginal Elders of SA; SA Health and Medical Research Institute; and the Grannies Group, which consists of female Aboriginal Elders who meet fortnightly. A partnership was formed with an Aboriginal researcher (KG, co-author), a Mein:tnk woman from South Eastern South Australia (SA) and the Wotjobaluk Nation in North Western Victoria. KG assisted with community engagement and providing support and guidance, to achieve respectful engagement, data analysis, report writing and advice about supporting literature. A respected Aboriginal Elder (Aunty Pat Waria-Read) and Ngadjuri woman with cultural boundaries within the Mid North of SA was invited to be a co-researcher in this project. This respected Elder attended the focus group with Aboriginal women during this project and provided cultural input into the development of themes with KG, BL and AB. The findings have been disseminated to the Grannies Group and the Aboriginal Communities and Families Health Research Alliance.

Study design

A community-based theoretical model was chosen by BL and agreed upon by co-authors as the framework for this study. This participatory research is suitable to understand, value, and determine the views of a community. This framework enables researchers to work with the community, confirm the research is a priority and continue to ensure the research remains aligned with the needs of the community (Badiie et al., 2012; Stoecker, 2013). In this study the community included women experiencing incarceration, prison staff and key members of the Aboriginal community. This study will seek to address, in part, the gap in evidence and research on the parenting education needs of women experiencing

incarceration. The study will involve the co-design, implementation, and evaluation of a parenting education program for women experiencing incarceration.

Focus groups facilitated sharing of the women's knowledge with storytelling and yarning circles, in a way that Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander peoples have always shared knowledge (Bessarab & Ng'andu, 2010; Sherwood & Kendell, 2013). Yarning involves talking or discussions, where information is exchanged and is a good way to collect descriptive data through storytelling. This approach enabled the women to tell their stories without interruption and the relationship to the research questions was analysed after completion of the group (Bessarab and Ng'andu, 2010). The groups aimed for women to safely engage and disclose sensitive information at their own discretion and share their stories (Kennedy et al., 2020). Focus groups have previously been used in prison settings (Pollack, 2003; Eddy et al., 2008) and are an effective way of discussing sensitive topics and can be used for planning programs (Linhorst, 2002).

Recruitment

Women received a study brochure from the Correctional Activities Coordinators and were invited to an information session, conducted by the researchers. Women who were interested in participating were recruited during the information session. All women were offered to attend a specific focus group for Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander women with a female Aboriginal Elder present. Alternatively, the women could attend other groups with non-Aboriginal women.

Sample and setting

Selection criteria included being able to speak and understand English and be a mother or carer of children. The researchers recognised that many Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander women are caregivers to children who may not be their biological children and the role of mother extends to grandmothers caring for their grandchildren (Jones et al., 2018; Sullivan et al., 2019). Women participants self-identified as Aboriginal.

In total, six focus groups were organised with 31 women in the prison, between December 2019 and April 2020. Women were offered to attend the focus groups in the

prison and Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander women could decide to attend a group that included non-Aboriginal women or a group for only Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander women with the presence of an Aboriginal Elder. This group was offered as the final group so that the women could make a choice which group they attended. Two women decided to return to attend the group for Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander women. The four focus groups included 13 Aboriginal women. The focus group conducted specifically for Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander women was attended by eight women, while seven Aboriginal women attended the general focus groups (two women attended twice). Between 3 and 8 women joined each focus group, with an average of 5 women attending each group. Two groups were held in a high-security and two in medium-security facilities. Four Aboriginal women decided not to participate with reasons including: required in court; wanting to communicate with Aboriginal Elder and not attend the group; two women did not give a reason. This paper reports on data from women who attended focus groups and identified as Aboriginal and the focus groups including all the women were published in Lovell et al. (2022).

All women were born in Australia, aged between 19 and 52 (average 32) and 11 were mothers/grandmothers. Two women did not have biological children but cared for siblings and nieces/nephews prior to incarceration with more than 27 children between them (three women did not state the number of children) ranging in age from less than six months to adults. Seven women were on remand (yet to be sentenced) and six women were sentenced between four months and four years; four of these women had sentences less than six months.

Focus groups were facilitated by BL and co-facilitated by MS and one by AB. Aunty Pat Waria-Read supported facilitation of the Aboriginal only group. The focus group discussions lasted between 60-90 minutes. The researchers are non-Aboriginal and middle-class, working in academia with an interest in health equity as well as supporting women and families in policy and research as health professionals. As outsiders to the criminal justice system and non-Aboriginal people, the researchers brought knowledge from past

experience working with women in health settings. Researchers also brought knowledge from literature about women involved in the criminal justice system, prior prison parenting program evaluations, knowledge of the invasion and colonisation on Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander peoples and the principles of trauma informed approaches. As outsiders, it was important to build rapport with participants (Nicholls, 2009). The presence of Aunty Pat Waria-Read supported the development of rapport and trust which was evident in the engagement of the women and is a strength of this study.

Data Collection

A naturalist approach aimed to gain an understanding of the lived experience of the women in prison and co-create knowledge. This study was conducted with the idea that individuals are experts in their lives and experiences which remained at the forefront of the methodology (Carl & Ravitch, 2018; Given, 2008). Participants were seated around a table and focus groups were commenced after gaining written consent. Focus group discussions were documented with a digital recorder and notes made by the co-facilitator on a flipchart visible to the women. Researchers shared some personal information, as a way of creating a safe space and encouraging participation. Semi-structured questions to build rapport and cover sensitive issues were used. Prompts were utilised to encourage discussion and participants were able to communicate with one another, stimulating group discussions. Towards the end of the discussion, we introduced parenting topics that had not been discussed previously. Once the group discussion came to an end, the co-facilitator summarised the main themes, using the notes. Women were encouraged to make comments during the summary and add further suggestions and/or confirm or refute content. Women were informed they could request mental health support if required.

Data analysis

Data analysis was conducted using reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2019), which was chosen for its flexibility and reflexive guidance. BL listened to audio recordings and transcribed each focus group verbatim. The 6 stages of data analysis were applied to facilitate the research, as suggested in Braun and Clarke (2006, 2014).

Transcripts were read multiple times to determine codes within the data and cross-checked with notes recorded. Using an inductive approach, codes were highlighted, refined, and then organised within a table. Themes were generated after codes with similar meaning were arranged together. Researchers discussed the codes, named, re-named, and defined the themes, to represent accurate interpretations of the ideas and experiences of the women.

Researchers (BL and AB) met with Aboriginal Elder (PWR) and researcher (KG) to discuss the findings and undertake further cultural analysis. This approach enabled deeper understanding of the data and interpretation of Aboriginal women's voices and helped to dispel researcher misinterpretation. Researchers shared initial themes and subthemes. KG and Aunty PWR were able to highlight the importance of building confidence and resilience in the women, as well as maintaining connection with their children. Supporting the women to explore a new reality was seen as important. The researchers had named one theme: 'barriers to parenting'. It was understood that this title was not appropriate after discussion because extended family continue to parent the children which is a strength of Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander parenting practices. Communication skills were seen as important to give women a strong voice and understanding of Child Protection and prepare women to negotiate their child's future which was identified by the women during the focus groups. The feeling of safety for women participating in education was discussed as important along with peer support and focusing on their strengths. NVivo12.6.0 software was used to assist with assigning individual quotes to support the themes. The themes were reconsidered and reorganised, to improve the overall story.

Findings

Themes were identified to represent the parenting education needs of Aboriginal women experiencing incarceration in this study. The themes are inter-related and connect with subthemes, encompassing the complexity of support required: (1) working towards a positive self; (2) communication; (3) parenting from a distance; (4) jumping through hoops to get connected; and (5) connecting with Aboriginal cultures.

When asked about their preference for attending a parenting program with Aboriginal women or sessions that included non-Aboriginal women, one woman said she would prefer combined. Another woman said:

I think it should be separate really, because whatever's Aboriginal, it's different – it's completely ... different – we've got generation, after generation, after generation and more hurt into it yeah and you got, you got white fellas and it's completely different, completely different, I think it should be separate (FG 5).

This woman demonstrated the importance of cultural connections, the shared experience of cultural understandings and the impact of trauma. The consensus of the group was to have the opportunity to attend parenting education, only with other Aboriginal women.

Some women recognised the uniqueness of the program development and demonstrated gratitude that their voices were being heard:

We all appreciate what you are doing and your time and for you to listen, because not a lot of... people don't listen to us (FG 5).

The women shared how a parenting program that created a feeling of support and focused on their specific needs would be beneficial. Overall, the women wanted to receive guidance and support, rather than being told how they should behave and/or what they should be doing to promote positive lifestyle changes.

Theme 1: Working towards a positive self.

This theme focuses on physical, mental, and emotional health that women described as important to fulfill their parenting roles. The women identified the need to learn about self-care and strategies to maintain a more positive lifestyle and rediscover their identity. It was recognised that racism and discrimination contributed to their emotional distress and trauma.

Difficult emotions

Many women spoke about challenging emotions experienced in prison, such as stress, anger, frustration, guilt, grief, loss, as well as sadness. One woman explained how she felt regret and remorse and was now grappling with intense emotions. Many women commented that they would benefit from learning skills and strategies to help them cope with

their emotions. Strategies women were currently using included: meditation, religion and/or other courses they were attending in the prison. Women wanted to learn more about coping mechanisms and self-care strategies for anxiety and stress. It was evident the women were aware how easy it was to use alcohol and drugs (prescribed and illicit) after release from prison:

I didn't have no workers, I didn't have nothing, so I didn't have any knowledge of anything, nothing at all and that's what people do, they turn to drugs just to blank, to numb (FG 3).

Women discussed how self-medicating with alcohol and illegal drugs was a destructive coping strategy and put them at further risk of not being able see their children. One woman described the loss of her child and the pain it caused her and recognised that her child may not want to continue a relationship with her:

I have to swallow my pride and let her be a child. If she pulls away from me it's her choice because I haven't been there (FG 5).

This story highlights the grief that can be experienced, without the support to deal with such intense emotions.

Caring for self

Women identified and discussed the importance of looking after their health and wellbeing:

I had to learn to look after myself, I had to start eating the right food, I had to worry about my health and my diet, you know. Now I am fully diabetic, so I had to care about my health, and I had to care about where I am moving ... (FG 5).

This woman had recognised the importance of her own health and was the only one to mention physical health. Other women discussed the importance of self-care and being a healthy mother for their children and recognised that they needed self-love and care to enable them to care for others.

Mothering and loss of identity

Several women were grappling with their identity, explaining the difficulty they experienced trying to maintain who they were as an individual, a mother and a parent. As one woman put it:

It's like you don't exist in here, I don't think at the women's prison – because you can't take photos in here of yourself – you can't take anything with you (FG 3).

One woman discussed being a mother but being childless because her children had been removed from her care, which led to confused feelings about her identity.

Racism and discrimination

Several women highlighted stories about racism and discrimination and wanted to find ways to cope. They described their experiences of white people deciding their futures and removing their children:

Cos where do you find a black fella taking away a black fella's kids? You never see that, didn't ya – you never see that, aren't ya? But you see a white fella taking away a black fella's kid all the time (FG 5).

The discussion revealed layers of racism and discrimination and the stigma of incarceration. Women expressed powerlessness, especially through their experience of child removal.

Theme 2: Communication.

This theme demonstrates the vital importance of communication and connection with their children and family. Effective communication with professional people and the need to gain skills to negotiate the Child Protection system were viewed as important. Women were wanting to improve telephone communication, especially with young children and teenagers. Several women discussed explaining to their children why they were in prison, in an age-appropriate way and agreed they would like to receive advice about what to tell their children.

One woman provided the child's perspective about receiving letters as she recalled the incarceration of her parents:

Well, as a child who has been out there receiving letters, honestly, because my mum used to, she did write me, I never wrote back because, you know, you're right, I didn't know what to say. I just believe the phone calls were better (FG 4). Her experience suggests the importance of children receiving letters, even if they do not respond. She also spoke about staying connected via telephone calls, explaining feeling anxious if her mother had not called and thinking someone in the prison was stopping her. About letters, she went on to say:

It was really good – I actually read them all and I thought it was.... but I just never sent anything back, I just didn't.

Did you use to go back and read 'em? (Asked by another participant).

Yeah, I did (FG 4).

The letters received as a child had meant a lot to her. Several women wanted more information about what to write to children of various age ranges. One woman had been directed by the Department of Child Protection (DCP) to start reunification with her child through letters, but she was too worried about what to write and consequently had not sent a letter.

Some women discussed not feeling confident about communicating with professional people and felt that they were not being heard by the DCP:

So we gotta educate Aboriginal people [at] that level of the DCP you know and so that Aboriginal people, so they can get in there and have a say (FG 5)

The women appeared frustrated and were unable to find a voice within the systems that constrained them and were motivated by a strong desire to regain custody of their children.

Theme 3: Parenting from a distance.

This theme focuses on challenges experienced when mothers are incarcerated and parenting from a distance. The women communicated their feelings of helplessness and inability to provide emotional support and nurturing their children needed.

One woman expressed that she had fallen into the parenting role saying, *'I didn't know what to do with them [siblings]. I don't, you know... as in emotionally and support and*

all that. I'm just like gliding out with them I suppose'. This woman expressed how she learnt about parenting as she went, without any guidance.

One mother described a visit with her child in the prison:

As soon as he heard "time", he leant over the table and ripped my hair out and says, "I'm taking this with me". He took it to the beach. Then I rang him later on and he said, "you came to the beach with me" and I said, "what do you mean?" and he said, "your hair" and I was like, oh my gosh (FG 5).

This story demonstrated the length a child had gone to for connection with his mother and signifies the need for other positive strategies and ensuring attachments can be maintained and strengthened.

One woman explained her experience visiting her father in prison as a child and being too scared to even look at him. No one had explained the rules to her. However, she loved her father and wanted to connect with him:

I know this is just a story, but I know... when I was five years old, I went to visit my dad in jail. They made me sit across the table from him, at this like steel little table thingo and I thought I wasn't allowed to look at him. So, I just sat there the whole time and I just looked down (FG 4).

This quote highlights the importance of preparing children for what to expect during a prison visit and that visits are an opportunity to talk.

Theme 4: Jumping through hoops to get reconnected.

This theme captures the women's strong desire to reconnect with their children, as they discussed the importance of learning what is necessary to re-gain custody. The women felt unsupported in the process of child removal, treated unfairly, confused, angry, frustrated and saddened. They wanted clarity about why their children were removed, how the system worked and to re-gain custody. Several women wanted guidance about neglect and discipline and the expectations of DCP.

One mother described trying to do what DCP suggested but each time she progressed, she seemed to be up against another unexpected request:

We know when we make a mistake, we own it. We know where we are, so with DCP coming through all these hula-hoops trying to do this and do that and then bang (claps), we come to another brick wall and then that's not enough, you gotta do this and you gotta do that (FG 5).

The women were at a loss to prove their parenting ability and the frustration of unattainable goals being set were causing them to feel anger towards the system. In two groups, women wanted to know more about neglect:

So, define what you mean by discipline? Define what you mean by neglect? So what, what, what is your definition and your understanding of neglecting or discipline? (FG 5).

Women expressed not having a clear understanding of the expectations of DCP in relation to neglect and were wanting explanations of what they would need to achieve, to keep their children in their care.

The women spoke with determination about regaining custody and it appeared to be the most important issue for many women. One woman described how her circumstances had led to the removal of her baby:

I am homeless and don't have any life skills and because I had a traumatic past and because I was a GOM (Government of Minister, now Government of Chief Executive) child myself, they don't think I am healthy enough to look after my own child (FG 3).

This woman described her childhood in unstable foster care which impacted negatively on her ability to mother her child, as she stated, '*I was moved from house, to house, to house*'. She felt that, with the right kind of practical support, she would be able to learn and develop as a mother, but her child was removed before she had the opportunity. She gave an example, saying '*I don't even know how to burp a baby. We need someone to help us with this stuff and that's where it starts*'.

Practical parenting

Women were interested in learning skills and gain advice about parenting and a deeper understanding about the expectations of DCP. They had specific questions relating to parenting, for example, screen time, discipline, neglect and developmental milestones for all age ranges. The women discussed not being taught life skills or having positive role models in their childhood to enable them to parent their own children. Collectively, these women acknowledged that parenting was challenging, especially as a single parent, as one woman commented, *'Yeah, because being a parent is not easy and it is very stressful, very stressful and especially when you are one parent'* (FG 3). Some important aspects of parenting were discussed, e.g., keeping a routine, role modelling, telling children stories, to love, nurture, provide structure and teach children. Two women wanted to know more about teenagers, with another woman commenting that parenting gets harder as children get older. Women discussed the need for a positive, non-judgemental person to support them and guide them through challenges. Two women suggested needing immediate support on release and were not aware of the many phone support services available saying, *'They should have a number to ring for a stressed-out mother'* (FG 3). One woman reflected on the changes she identified to move forward and cut ties with unsupportive friends:

It has taken me five years to realise, that like my kids are...when I get out, I have no friends, I have to do this, and it has taken me five years to figure that out for myself – what if I didn't think of that? (FG 3).

This woman expressed frustration about the length of time it had taken to realise that her children and their needs were a priority. She expressed the need for women to be educated about prioritising decisions and making positive life choices. This woman discussed how case scenarios detailing different circumstances that could unfold after release would help women foresee certain situations and may foster good decision making.

Theme 5: Connecting with Aboriginal cultures.

This theme highlights the importance of culture and the significance of strengthening and maintaining connections, including yarning with peers and reaching out to respected

Elders for knowledge and wisdom. Several women wanted to share their cultural identity as part of their introduction to the group and information about their children. They suggested the opportunity to be mentored by their Elders whilst in prison, demonstrating the importance of family, community, and cultural connections:

I want Grannies circle to come back, like in Yatala (men's prison), they have

Granny circles, but we don't really get to have like our Elders come in (FG 5).

The women verbalised respect for their Aboriginal Elders and we observed the trust, connection, and respect with the Elder in attendance. Women in one group mentioned a healing circle available in the prison and reported it making a positive difference to their wellbeing. The importance of connecting with their children was clear:

Our oxygen is our children – our energy to this planet is our children (FG 3).

This statement highlighted the importance of their children and how motherhood intertwined with their connection to culture and Country.

Implications

Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander parenting practices are not homogenous and take place within the family kinship system and community environment. A parenting program would need to be founded on elements of Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander parenting practices and encourage sharing and understanding of cultural influences on parenting (Malin et al., 1996; Lohoar et al., 2014). The program would need to respect the Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander definition of health which is holistic and includes connection as a core spiritual principle, providing Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander peoples with a sense of belonging, identity, and pride (Butler et al., 2019). The definition of health requires physical, social, emotional, and ecological needs which were reflected in the current study (Verbunt et al., 2021).

The need for connection with other Aboriginal women was identified as important, including supporting each other whilst in prison and on release, community engagement, yarning circles, and continued support. The connection to culture, community, and family

across the generations are important elements contributing to the health of Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander peoples (Verbunt et al., 2021).

The program would need to focus on strengths, promoting the inbuilt strengths that exists within families and their communities (Geia, 2012). Focusing on strengths and the ability to adapt parenting to individual needs that align with education that is trauma-informed are important. Most women who enter prison have experienced trauma (Abad et al., 2013; Loper & Tuerk, 2006; Priguda & Burke, 2020; Stone et al., 2015). Trauma was evident in the stories of 'lived experiences' and indicates the need for an approach that is strengths-based and trauma-informed (SAMHSA, 2014; Vaswani & Paul, 2019; Wyndow et al., 2020). The trauma-informed approach upholds an attitude and belief that the person can recover (Kezelman & Stavropoulos, 2020). This approach is underpinned by the key principles of: safety; trustworthiness; peer support; empowerment, voice, and choice; collaboration and cultural, historical and gender issues (SAMHSA, 2014). A recent systematic review and metanalysis determining the perinatal experiences of parents who suffered mistreatment in their childhood highlighted the importance of incorporating these principles (Chamberlain et al., 2019). Skilled facilitators are required to understand and promote the core principles. However, in the current system where punishment is the fundamental element of incarceration, a trauma-informed system may not be possible to achieve (Vaswani & Paul, 2019). Control and punishment have had discriminatory and devastating effects on Aboriginal peoples as seen by the over-representation of Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander peoples in the criminal justice system. Linked to this is the removal of Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander children from their families, affecting future generations (Baldry & Cunneen, 2014).

Discussion

Our findings demonstrate the complex needs of Aboriginal mothers in SA experiencing incarceration and the lack of specific parenting supports to address their needs. This unique opportunity to spend time with Aboriginal women and listen to their parenting education needs is the starting point of program development and is not often

considered in the design of prison programming (Baldry et al., 2008). This study gave voice to Aboriginal women and respects their narrative as knowledge, to identify their needs and priorities as experienced by them (Rowe et al., 2015). Although the women were separated from their children by incarceration and many through Child Protection, they demonstrated motivation to learn about ways to improve their parenting. The women were wanting clear explanations and an opportunity to discuss parenting with other Aboriginal women. The women contributed their ideas about topics to include in a parenting program. They strongly expressed wanting to reconnect with their children of all age ranges and were seeking support to improve their parenting and life skills.

In addition to our main findings, we also found that racism, discrimination and feeling judged remained an issue for the women, despite the rules and regulations supposedly designed to protect them. The United Nations declaration on the rights of Aboriginal peoples affirms their rights to equality and connection with cultures, language, spirituality, land, and traditions (United Nations, 2007). The women we communicated with discussed the importance of connecting with their cultures and Elders and the limited opportunity they had to do this.

The Australian Law Reform recommend that programs for Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander women must be developed with and conducted by Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander women (Australian Law Reform Commission [ALRC], 2018). Although these recommendations exist, there have been few parenting programs that uphold these standards. 'The Bangkok Rules' were developed by the United Nations General Assembly (2011) to support incarcerated women and children. Bangkok rule 54 specifically includes the need for culturally appropriate programs, in consultation with women experiencing incarceration and relevant community groups. Jones et al. (2018) identified the need for education, training, and culturally informed parenting programs to begin addressing these recommendations.

The stories that Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander women shared in previous studies outlined similar issues, with main concerns being their children; separation from

children; unstable housing; mental health issues; drugs and alcohol; and family violence (Baldry et al., 2008; Goulding 2004; Kendall et al., 2019; Lawrie 2003; Sullivan et al., 2019; Wilson et al., 2017). A recent study reported the worst aspect of incarceration for Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander mothers was the separation from their children (Anthony et al., 2021). Similar complex needs were identified in the current study, highlighting the intense practical support Aboriginal mothers require, as well as identifying their specific parenting education needs which had not been the focus of previous Australian studies.

One woman likened the removal of children through Child Protection, to the Stolen Generations. The continuation of removal impacts heavily on generations of Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander families and continues today (Baldry, 2013; Krakouer et al., 2018; O'Donnell et al., 2019; Tilton & Anderson, 2017). A recent study demonstrated the link between psychological distress and poor social and emotional wellbeing for women in prison, with a history of removal from their family under discriminatory Child Protection practices (Sullivan et al., 2019). The symptoms of this trauma were revealed in the discussions we had with the women. They were fighting the system and discussed needing support and clear explanations about the Child Protection system and reconnection with their children.

Conclusions

The women were able to express unique challenges experienced, as women and mothers incarcerated and separated from their children. The ongoing trauma of child removal was particularly evident, as was their strong desire to connect with their families, community, and cultures. The women were grateful for the opportunity for people to listen to their stories. At the completion of the focus group, they embraced the researchers implying that the positive experience of yarning about their experiences was helpful. The women portrayed a sense of hope and demonstrated a strong drive to change their circumstances, but asked for guidance and direction from trusted people, preferably Aboriginal Elders and leaders. Five themes were identified after analysis and provided insight into the design of a parenting education program for Aboriginal women in SA. This program would need to be

developed from a strengths-based, trauma-informed approach, as well as utilising reflective practice of 'lived experiences' to develop skills and wisdom. The themes and subthemes that emerged in this study, along with other literature on First Nations women with children in prison, provide structure for the development of a parenting education program, with the aim to support the challenges and concerns of Aboriginal women in prison.

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