Narratives of Mothers with their Children in Prison

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Setting the Scene: New Zealand Context

Research Design

Power and Control
  • Monitored Mothering within a Prison Nursery
Legislation - Setting the Scene

- Corrections (Mothers and Babies) Amendment Act 2008
- Mother and Baby Unit (MBU)
It is in the best interests of the child not to be separated from his or her mother at a crucial time in the child’s development.

Allowing women to care for their child in prison, represents an opportunity to work with women prisoners to aid rehabilitation and reduce the risk of re-offending.

(Department of Corrections, 2007, Corrections (Mothers and Babies) Amendment Bill – background information for law and order select committee)
Methods - Research Design

- Qualitative Study
  - Narrative Style
  - Participant Observation
  - Thematic Analysis
Research Rationale - Research Design

- How is the MBU experienced by the mother?
- Opportunity to tell their story
Power and Control

★ System to Control the Role of Motherhood
★ Living in Close Confinements
  • Surveillance of Other Mothers
★ Dual Role of Officer
  • Jailer and Helper
“Some exceptional prison staff still do some life changing work with individual prisoners” (Liebling, 2011, p. 544)
Unique Opportunity for Officer / Prisoner Relationships

Dual Role of Officers

- “Where are all the blue people?”
- “The nanas”
- Officer at the birth
“I don’t take on anything they have got to say, because they are just screws. They have got no idea and I don’t know their kids. Maybe they didn’t do such a good job of parenting. They might have some ideas but because they are screws and I’m still a prisoner, what they say means nothing to me. They are just a bunch of smurfs that think they are parents of the year.” (Nancy)
Officers trained in safety and security can be interpreted as negative and frightening (Arditti, 2003)

“They should come in here without uniforms. Because when they do come in, and they come in with their uniforms, their approach with us is the same they have towards the child. And certain staff members, the way they talk to us is the same as they talk to the child. Yep ok you have corrections staff here for us, but then when it comes to the children, it is that attitude you know.” (Rita)
Resistance to calling prisoners by preferred name linked to stronger commitment to punishment (Crewe, Liebling & Hulley, 2011)
Being successful in motherhood requires a certain level of autonomy (Luther & Gregson, 2011)

“What happened was every time an officer walked into the house they would be like ‘try it this way, do this thing, do that’. Every officer had their own way of parenting and they would always f-ing push it onto me you know like ‘you need to be doing this, she needs to be eating this’. And who the f was to say that their way was right you know what I mean. I know what my daughter needs you know, like a mother knows best for their daughter. And half of them had no kids anyway.” (Carrie)
“It would be nice if officers actually came in everyday and said ‘how are you, how has your day been, did you have a good night?’ If someone actually takes the time then I will say something if I have any issues. But I am not the kind of person to go searching someone out to talk to.” (Naomi)
Prison may be the ambulance at the bottom of the cliff for these women, but the Mother and Baby Unit (MBU) might be the fence at the top for the child.

