

**A PARENT BEHIND BARS: INVESTIGATING THE SCHOLASTIC  
EXPERIENCES OF LEARNERS WHOSE PARENT/S ARE INCARCERATED**

**By**

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EXPERIENCES OF LEARNERS WHOSE PARENT/S ARE INCARCERATED**

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## DECLARATION

I, Nolene Moodley, declare that this Master of Education dissertation is my own work and all primary and secondary sources have been appropriately acknowledged. The dissertation has not been submitted to any other institution as part of an academic qualification.

This Dissertation is prepared in fulfilment of the requirement of the Master of Education degree at the School of Education, Edgewood Campus, University of KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa.

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## **ABSTRACT**

The incarceration of a parent exposes children to multiple difficulties which place them at risk for adverse behavioural outcomes and academic decline at school. Trends in parental incarceration reveal constantly growing prison populations. Paralleling this would be a substantial number of children who would be affected by the incarceration of a parent. Unfortunately, research into parental incarceration reveals that there are few studies which highlight the educational consequences of this phenomenon. The present study is thus concerned with the risks and unintended educational consequences of parental incarceration on children.

This qualitative study sought to understand the scholastic experiences of children who have a parent/s in prison. These experiences were then used to determine effects, if any, on the academic performance of the child. The study also aimed to identify administrative, policy and school-based support structures which may be designed and implemented at school-level to help initiate more positive reactions to parental incarceration.

The sample comprised of four school-going children over the age of 14, who were interviewed regarding the effect of their parents' imprisonment on their families, relationships at school, and the subsequent consequences of these experiences within the context of education. Interviews detailed their lived experiences through life history accounts, aspiring to capture both the positive and negative outcomes of parental incarceration.

The interviews revealed a range of challenges linked to separation from parents; these include financial and residential instability, non-disclosure and inadequate home-based support, all of which have a direct or indirect bearing on education. They also revealed a certain degree of maturity and resiliency amongst children who had to become both self-supportive and self-sufficient after a parent's arrest.

The data collected helped identify specific aspects of parental incarceration that require further study. Results underscore the need for more longitudinal comparative studies into predisposition, family dynamics and existing relationships which also influence a child's reaction to parental incarceration. For those administrators, policy makers and school staff, who are responsible for servicing the needs of children of prisoners, this study provides interventions and recommendations that may be used to improve educational outcomes and possibly alter the direction in which the lives of these children may be headed.

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## CHAPTER ONE

### INTRODUCTION

#### 1.1 Background and orientation to the study

Incarceration, as a sanction for criminal behaviour, has far-reaching consequences that often extend well beyond the confines of a prison. While imprisonment does play a meaningful role in addressing criminal behaviour, chastisement does not occur in a vacuum, and the prisoner sometimes does not bear his or her punishment alone. For their families, especially children, the effects of parental incarceration can be equally punitive. The lives of children also incur disruptions, and can be severely affected by the separation caused by parental incarceration. As their family system slowly disintegrates, children could face prolonged and intensified periods of stress, instability, and uncertainty. Since information on prisoner's families "...is not systematically collected by jails, correctional departments, schools, child welfare systems, or other systems", very little concrete data exists on the precise number of children affected by parental incarceration (Poehlmann, Dallaire, Booker Loper & Shear, 2010, p. 575). Kjellstrand and Eddy (2011a; 2011b) draw parallels between the number of adult prison inmates, and a population of children who have parents in prison, but generally, information gathered on the parenting status of prisoners is largely superficial resulting in limited reliable parent-child prisoner statistics. If this little is known about the parenting status of prisoners, then it is likely that even less has been discovered about their children, or how they may have been affected by the imprisonment. This explains why researchers including Murray, Farrington and Sekol (2012, p. 175) refer to the children of inmates as "...the 'forgotten victims' of crime, the 'orphans of justice' and the 'unseen victims of the prison boom'".

While a prison sentence intends to punish offenders, however, when these offenders are parents, their children often endure a form of punishment too. In their study on children of imprisoned parents, Hounslow, Stephenson, Steward, and Crancher (1982, p. 1, quoted in Cunningham, 2001, p. 1) said that:

Child punishment is often the other side of the coin to parental imprisonment. This is one of the shadowy corners of the criminal justice system seldom spotlighted. In our society, prisoners are marginalized; their spouses and adult



friends isolated and hidden; while their children – to all intents and purposes – are invisible.

Hagan (1996, p. 27) adds that the problems facing the children of prisoners “are the largely hidden and uncalculated costs of imprisonment”; and while all attention is focused on the imprisoned parent, the needs of the child often go unnoticed. Although children are also affected by the process and outcomes of the incarceration, they are often unaided when dealing with the effects. Since the incarceration of a parent is likely to present a domino effect on many aspects of a young child’s development, the apparent lack of insight into this phenomenon ought to be a major concern for families and all institutions serving children, most especially, schools.

Parental incarceration disrupts the family system and may promote negative values, attitudes, and behaviours in the child, causing scholastic problems whilst also increasing the probability of inter-generational cycles of criminality. Tasca, Rodriguez, and Zats (2011), and Murray *et al.*, (2012) concur that the imprisonment of a parent has been linked to multiple emotional, psychological and social difficulties, including substance abuse, maladjustment, aggression, gangsterism, and delinquency, which may develop further into a range of long-term problems. Findings also point toward a group of children who are at a greater pre-disposition to mental instability, school difficulties, and school dropouts (Kjellstrand & Eddy, 2011a). Kjellstrand and Eddy (2011a) highlight a meta-analysis of research on children of prisoners, which found them to be twice as likely to exhibit anti-social behaviours at school when compared to children without parents in prison. They contend that these risks become prevalent even when other possible risk factors are controlled. Given the connection between anti-social behaviours and poor outcomes in adult-life, particularly inter-generational cycles of anti-social behaviour and criminology, understanding the psychosocial effects of incarceration on the child, may be crucial to breaking the chain of effects that parental incarceration aggravates from childhood to adulthood.

Johnson (2007, p. 3) states that a prison sentence may be a “death sentence” of a parent’s relationship with their child, while other scholars, such as Hagan (1996) suggest that it could actually liberate the child from an unstable home environment and prevent future damage. Whatever the case may be, children who have parents in prison may differ on a number of dimensions from children who have not been affected by incarceration. Through their

parents, they may have already been exposed to stressors like chronic poverty, mental instability, substance abuse, criminality, and violence. Hagan (1996) believes that in some cases the imprisonment of a parent might be the final, lethal blow to an already destabilised family system. Affected children may also experience additional risks in their communities and surrounding environment. It is therefore difficult to ascertain whether their difficulties are due to the incarceration, is merely the exacerbation of an already challenged situation, or just a risk marker. It is not uncommon for these children to be hauled between caregivers, separated from siblings and friends, or moved between schools time after time. These disruptions may result in the development of emotional or psychosocial problems, which can manifest in aggression, withdrawal or academic problems at school (Mackintosh, Myers & Kennon, 2006). Their scholastic problems may also include "...internalising and externalizing behaviour problems, substance abuse, adult offending and incarceration, truancy and school failure" (Poehlmann *et al.*, 2010, p. 575). Additional experiences may involve stigmatisation or victimisation and greater delinquency in comparison to their peers.

Research into associations between parental incarceration and the outcomes for children has yielded contrasting results. While some scholars claim that the risks are quite extensive (Murray & Farrington, 2008a, cited in Murray *et al.*, 2012), others contend that the risks cannot be solely attributed to the incarceration. While there is a probability of maladjustment in correlation to a parent's imprisonment, it has not yet been confirmed through research. In contrast, it is quite possible that imprisonment can also be a key protective factor in helping a child overcome an emotionally or physically stressful home situation. In cases where the imprisoned parent had been abusive or a negative role model, their imprisonment might prove more advantageous and could liberate the child from what may be considered a harmful or destructive home environment; benefiting the holistic development of the child. Nevertheless, most research into the issue of parental incarceration uncovers one common feature, which highlights an obvious lack of adequate or extensive study into this particular subject.

The effect of parental incarceration extends to several aspects of a child's life, but this study honed in on the specific area of education, specifying the scholastic consequences for children. However, it must be stressed that these experiences do not take place within a vacuum and there are other risk factors from home and society, which may have additional bearings on their scholastic experiences. These risks will also be considered within the context of education.

## **1.2 Statement of the problem**

The influence of the family unit on the growth and development of a child is an area of human development that cannot be played down. Any disruption to this unit, unless done for constructive reasons could result in severe consequences for the child (Bowlby, 1978, cited in Parke & Clarke-Steward, 2002). Separation from a parent is known to trigger reactions like anger, feelings of rejection, depression, and diminished self-esteem, all of which are likely to initiate behavioural and academic decline as well. Most studies conducted in the field of parent-child separation have focused on prominent reasons for separation like death or divorce and there are very limited studies exploring less common causes like parental incarceration.

While separation from a parent has gained fundamental interest in studies concerning child development and education, the subject of parental incarceration as a form of separation remains largely understudied. Yet, with rising prison populations, many children find themselves separated from a parent through incarceration. Consequences of incarceration for the adult prisoners are well researched, but the effect on their children often goes unnoticed. Though parental incarceration predisposes children to several issues linked to separation, little is known about the phenomenon or its effect on the child's development or learning processes. Parental incarceration, like any other form of parent-child separation presents a host of behavioural, social, and emotional setbacks, which in turn may have a profound effect on the child's educational and learning experiences. These are the very experiences that this study will investigate.

## **1.3 Rationale**

With ever-increasing prison populations (Kjellstrand & Eddy, 2011a; 2011b), there exists a likelihood that many children would be affected by the imprisonment of at least one parent at some point in their lives. Although there may be general consequences to parent-child separation, there are also unique consequences linked specifically to parental incarceration that require further examination. The issue of parental incarceration is generally ignored by the education system and as a result, those affected by it are often forgotten. As a result, they struggle silently through the educational system without any attention to their needs. Any effort to assist these children should begin with a thorough understanding of the problems or

issues they face at grass root level. For schools to assist children who have parents in prison, they must become aware of the prevalence, risks, and challenges associated with parental incarceration. This study is therefore an attempt to avail such knowledge to schools so that they are well informed and better equipped to assist children who have parents in prison.

Research shows that there exists minimal data regarding the effects of parental incarceration on the child; this study highlights what existing literature has uncovered regarding parental incarceration in terms of its prevalence, consequences for children and possible strategies to enable children to cope with this rather clandestine, yet equally damaging form of family breakdown. Research generated from this study will investigate the impact of parental incarceration on the scholastic experiences of the child by evaluating the effects of such experiences on academic performance.

#### **1.4 Purpose of the research**

The purpose of this study is to investigate the learning experiences and the possible effects of parental incarceration on a child's education. The research will make inferences on how the absence of a parent due to incarceration influences a child's learning process. The objective is to ascertain how children cope academically, emotionally, behaviourally, psychologically, and socially within the context of the school. The study then proposes directions for future research and suggests strategies which may be adopted by schools to deal with typical cases of parental incarceration.

#### **1.5 Research objectives**

1. To investigate the schooling experiences of children who have a parent/s in prison.
2. To explore the link between parental incarceration and the child's academic performance.
3. To examine the role schools can play as a support structure for learners who have parents in prison.

## 1.6 Research Questions

The study aims to answer three research questions.

1. What are the schooling experiences of children who have a parent/s in prison?
2. How do these experiences affect their academic performance?
3. How can schools meet the needs of learners with parents in prison?

## 1.7 Significance of the study

Most studies conducted in the field of incarceration have focused largely on the outcomes of imprisonment for the inmates themselves with limited consideration for the families or, more specifically, the children of prisoners. Similarly, studies into parent-child separation have also tended to focus on separation resulting from family conflict, death, or divorce, while separation due to parental incarceration remains largely understudied. This research study hopes to combine those two elements into a study, which can contribute to the field of education and learning in two ways. The study will firstly highlight the prominence and potential effects of parental incarceration on childhood learning processes in the hope of providing valuable scholarly literature into the area of parental incarceration and childhood learning.

Secondly, in the context of theory development, this study will test several theories on parent-child separation. The *Psychological Parenting Theory* states that children react adversely to the absence of a parent (Davis, 1996). In this regard, this study aims to do two things, one is to show that the absence of a parent is potentially damaging for the developing child, but when the parent is a negative role model, their absence may then prove beneficial for the child. Bowlby's (1982) *attachment theory*, which propagates the formulation and importance of parent-child attachments, is another theory worth considering. Here, the bonds established between the child and the parent is prioritized, and caution is rendered to the effects of forced separation of parents from their children. This is supported by the *Strain Theory* (Hagan, 1996; Johnson & Easterling, 2012), which states that in the event that the parent had previously contributed in a positive manner to the child's life and family system, then their imprisonment may result in certain strains, such as economic deprivation, which could have an adverse effect on the child.

The *Social Interaction Learning Theory* (Kjellstrand & Eddy, 2011a; 2011b), conceptualises parental incarceration, family functioning and may be relevant in understanding child adjustment in this regard. Researchers into this theory posit that behaviours are learned through social interactions within the family and although other influencers, such as peers and teachers emerge at different life-stages, the parent remains the most influential force in the child's development (Kjellstrand & Eddy, 2011a; 2011b). If the parent was deemed to have such significance in the child's growth and development, it would be rather interesting to note the effect of their forced and abrupt removal from the family system.

In the field of education, understanding the impact of parental incarceration on children may provide educational role players and policy developers with invaluable insights into parental incarceration as a formidable external barrier to learning. The information gathered from this report could elicit positive strategies to accommodate and handle the effects of parental incarceration at school level. On understanding the prevalence and adverse effects of incarceration on children, schools can then develop effective counselling programmes for the children of inmates. If parental incarceration proves cause for emotional, social, behavioural, and academic difficulties in children, it can then be directly targeted for remediation.

## **1.8 Methodology**

This study took place within the interpretivist paradigm and was an in-depth exploration into the lived, scholastic experiences of children who have a parent in prison. A qualitative research approach was employed and this aimed to achieve specific understanding of the effects of parental incarceration on a child's academic performance. Qualitative research involves an empirical, systematic method of research aimed at acquiring a deep understanding of a particular issue concerning people in a specific context (Locke, Spirduso & Silverman, 1993). This methodology was aptly suited to this research study as it elicited understanding into the unique experiences of children and the impact parental incarceration had on their educational processes. Since this was a study into actual, lived experiences, the data did not feature statistics but instead provided individual recounts from the participants verbatim. This, according to Murray and Beglar (2009), is a distinctive feature of qualitative research. The research report begins with a review of several international and nationally based scholarly articles on parental incarceration. This will provide a basis for what will be uncovered through the research report.



### ***1.8.1 Research Tools***

To obtain substantial qualitative data, the life histories of four participants were examined. “A life history is the story of a person’s life. Life histories allow the voice of those who are seldom heard to be heard... So, in the reporting of research within this paradigm, there will be many quotes and stories from participants. The data is qualitative,” (Bertram, Christiansen, Land, Dempster & James, 2010, p. 38). The use of life histories allowed greater latitude and captured not only the schooling experiences but also the emotional, social, psychological and behavioural consequences of parental incarceration. Life histories were also useful in ascertaining how the absence of a parent had affected their lives over a specific period. Data for life histories was collected mainly from stories written by the learners. The written stories were then used to evoke discussions during the interview process.

One-on-one interviews were conducted with the four participants. These interviews, linked to life history accounts, were based on open-ended questions, which allowed the learners the opportunity to speak unreservedly of their experiences. Unstructured field notes, regarding attitudes, behaviours and emotional responses expressed by the learners during the interview phase were also gathered. These interviews were recorded using a dictaphone and later transcribed verbatim for analytical purposes.

### ***1.8.2 Sampling***

The participants in this study were located and selected by means of purposive sampling. Purposive sampling, according to Merriam (1998) is the deliberate selection of specific participants with the intention of gaining information rich cases, which then allows for the in-depth study of a particular phenomenon. Purposive sampling enables the researcher to make specific choices about who to include in the sample. The selected participants did not represent the entire population of learners with parents in prison, but they provided useful data on their individual and unique experiences. The purpose of this study was not to generalise the results beyond the sample represented in the study but to understand the experiences of several individuals who are facing parental incarceration.

The participants selected for this particular study were school-going children over the age of 14 who, at the time of data collection, had one or more parent in prison. At the age of 14 and over, learners are more mature and were able to provide reliable and informed accounts of their experiences. They were also less inclined to be overwhelmed by the study. The sample

was selected purposively to represent learners and parents of both genders, with varying ages and social backgrounds. Although the study sample initially consisted of five participants, acting on advice from his psychologist, one participant was excluded due to emotional instability resulting from a change of foster homes. Nevertheless, the remaining four participants provided sufficient data for analysis and interpretation. The participants were recruited by targeting parents who were serving time at local correctional facilities and who still had contact with their families. These parents were approached with the research proposal and given the option to participate in the study. Convenience sampling was useful in this case as it was rather difficult to readily obtain samples for a study of this nature.

### **1.9 Theoretical framework**

This research study investigating the scholastic experiences of learners whose parents are incarcerated utilizes three theoretical perspectives. The *psychological parenting theory* (Davis, 1996) lends itself quite easily to the notion that any form of parent-child separation could have adverse consequences for the child's development. Psychological parenting theorists believe that children need uninterrupted contact with their parents, the lack of which would often result in long-term behavioural, academic and social regression for the child. This study also utilizes a developmental perspective in the form of Bowlby's (1982) *attachment theory* which stresses the socio-emotional functions and overall importance of the development of relationships between the parent and child. This theory draws special attention to primary parent-child attachments, emphasizing how separation or any disconnect in these relationships could cause children to internalise their problems. To further substantiate, I utilized the *strain theory* and drew on the work of Hagan (1996) and Johnson and Easterling (2012) where strain is defined as any unpleasant condition that an individual may dislike and which may cause unnecessary stress on that person. For a child, separation from a parent is stressful and it is likely to intensify existing strain or introduce additional strain into his or her life. This increase in stress is often the cause of depression, risky behaviours and delinquency in children (Agnew, 1992).



## 1.10 Key definitions

The following terms are defined for the purpose of this study:

### 1.10.1 “learner”

A *learner* refers to any person receiving education or obliged to receive education in terms of the South African Schools Act 84 of 1996. In this study, the term *learner* pertains to those children who are currently studying in the mainstream schooling system (Department of Education, 1996). For ethical reasons, all learners are at high school level and over the age of 14.

### 1.10.2 “parent”

As defined in the South African Schools Act 84 of 1996, a *parent* refers to:

- (a) the parent or guardian of a learner;
- (b) the person entitled to legal custody of a learner; or
- (c) the person who undertakes to fulfil the obligations of a person referred to in paragraphs; (a) and (b) towards the learner’s education at school.

For the purposes of this study, a *parent* is identified as the biological mother or father of a child, any other caregiver will be referred to as the guardian or custodian of the child.

### 1.10.3 “parental incarceration”

In this study, the term *parental incarceration* refers to short-term confinement or imprisonment of a biological parent by the criminal justice system (Vacca, 2008; Petsch & Rochlen, 2009). The study focuses on convicted prisoners facing one to five year prison terms, and does not include awaiting-trial prisoners or those sentenced for life. Confinement is limited to correctional facilities such as prisons and jails.

### 1.10.4 “scholastic experiences”

I use the term *scholastic experiences* to refer to the outcomes resulting from the incarceration of a parent that could affect the schooling of the child. This study does not pertain to those outcomes that generally happen during childhood or at school per se. Although the study focuses on their schooling experiences, this cannot be divorced from the child’s home life

and other social experiences, which also have a bearing on school and academic performance. Experiences might have occurred or been measured at any time after parental incarceration first happened and while parents were in prison. Areas under investigation are behavioural, social, mental and educational, all of which have a significant impact on a child's learning experiences.

### **1.11 Assumptions**

Several assumptions guided this investigation into the effects of parental incarceration on scholastic performance. Firstly, I had to assume that the child belonged to a family system outside the school, and the relationships and networks within this family structure had to be understood (Sameroff, 1994, cited in Parke & Clarke-Steward, 2002). Second, I assumed that the quality of the child's relationship with their parent preceding the arrest was an important aspect for consideration. Next, I assumed that the cognitive level, behavioural and academic echelons of the child should also be identified (Bowlby, 1973, cited in Parke & Clarke-Steward, 2002). Also, thought was given to the nature of school staff liaisons with children, this to ascertain existing relationships with children. Finally, the availability and dispensation of school-based support was considered.

### **1.12 Conclusion**

This study endeavoured to present and examine the lives of children who were experiencing parental incarceration. It was an attempt to understand if and how their lives may have been impacted by the incarceration of a parent, and the possible consequences of this for development and learning in the school context. This chapter has discussed the objectives and purposes of this study. It also presented a brief description of the methodologies and theoretical underpinnings of this research project, both of which will be discussed in greater detail in the next two chapters. In the chapter two, an analysis of existing literature will provide a fundamental contextual and theoretical basis for the study.

## **CHAPTER TWO**

### **LITERATURE REVIEW**

#### **2.1 Introduction**

Parent-child separation due to death or divorce has significant consequences for child development and learning, but what of separation through parental incarceration? Existing literature on this subject suggests that parental incarceration may be associated with increased delinquency, withdrawal and depression, however, many studies fail to identify the causal effects of pre-incarceration risk factors, such as “parental substance abuse, mental health problems and abuse histories” which may have already predisposed the child to risk prior to the parent’s imprisonment (Johnson, 2007, p. 3). More recent studies have uncovered specific problems which can be linked to trauma due to separation from a parent, reduced contact with parents, changes in living arrangements, socioeconomic deprivation, genetic pre-dispositions, while others highlight potential benefits to the removal of a poor role model from the child’s life. With this in mind, this chapter presents literature on parental incarceration to ascertain the impact on child development and learning. The review begins with a focus on recent trends in parental incarceration; then a contextual and theoretical framework is drawn to gain insight into the relationship between parental incarceration and child development. To understand the influence this relationship has on education, links will then be established between the contextual factors and schooling experiences of children. Included in this chapter is a review of literature on school-based intervention strategies. The chapter ends with the presentation of literary findings and recommendations.

#### **2.2. Trends in parental incarceration**

A growing reliance on incarceration as a sanction for criminal behaviour has placed South Africa ninth in the world in terms of prison population rates (ICPS World Prison Brief, 2013). Data from the International Centre for Prison Studies (ICPS, 2013) indicated a steady increase in incarceration rates over the past 10 years, from 104 790 prisoners in 1992 to 156 370 prisoners in 2013. Although adjustments to policies in attempts to reduce the number of inmates, accounted for a drop in incarcerates between 2004 to 2007, this did not curb the increase in subsequent years. In 2012, prisons held populations which were 31, 7% above

capacity (ICPS). Studies conducted by Parke and Clarke-Steward (2002) indicate that the number of mothers versus fathers in prison differs, with more males in prison than females; this is consistent with ICPS statistics worldwide. In addition, the duration of sentences usually differs for mothers and fathers as well. The lengths of sentences is usually determined by the severity of the crimes committed and statistics reveal that males are more likely to be imprisoned for violent crimes which call for longer sentences. Mothers, on the other hand are more likely to be imprisoned for fraud or drug-related crimes, usually serving shorter sentences (Parke & Clarke-Steward, 2002).

Paralleling this prison boom is an ever-increasing number of children who would have incarcerated parents but since information of prisoner's children is not systematically kept by correctional facilities, an accurate account of children affected by parental incarceration is unavailable. Murray and Farrington (2008a, as cited in Murray *et al.*, 2012), stated that a lack of concise statistics on the children of prisoners appears to be a worldwide trend. Nevertheless, provisional statistics indicate that the numbers may be quite considerable. With no systematic way of recording the number of children who have parents in prison, it is difficult to gather accurate statistics of children affected by adult prison population estimates. However, what can be deduced is that as prison populations increase, the rate of children affected will also rise (Nesmith & Ruhland, 2008). These trends also suggest a likelihood that many more children are yet to experience parental incarceration during their lifetime, attracting interest to what the outcomes of parental incarceration might be for them as well.

Although the lives of many children may already be affected by parental incarceration, their needs are generally unaccounted for, especially during the judicial process (Nesmith & Ruhland, 2008) and by policy makers. This should be a major concern for policy development because the imprisonment of a parent not only affects the imprisoned but as Hagan (1996, p. 21) points out it "...can also severely diminish the social and economic capital on which families and communities depend to successfully raise children." Thus given the propensity to harm literally millions of children, there is a need to appraise the overall costs and benefits of incarceration and to investigate its effects on children.

## **2.3 Impact of parental incarceration**

### ***2.3.1 Separation from a parent***

Recent research shows that even when parent-child separation occurs in loving homes, it is still associated with feelings of depression, rejection and low self-esteem (Parke & Clarke-Steward, 2002). Years of research has proven that, “two parent households are associated with more supportive home environments and positive behavioural outcomes among children” (Tasca *et al.*, 2013, p. 232-233). Thus, it would be expected that the consequences of parental incarceration, with all its controversy, might be even greater for the child. Existing trends in parental incarceration reveal a group of children whose lives are disrupted, and in some cases, deeply distressed by separation from their mother or father (McGowan & Blumenthal, 1978, cited in Hagan, 1996). Imprisonment, like any form of parent-child separation often leads to the steady disintegration of the family structure and can cause the child to endure prolonged and intensified periods of instability and strain.

Davis (1996) believes that children need uninterrupted nurturance and contact with their parent and the lack thereof may expose them to various risks associated with neglect and abandonment. He quotes psychological parent theorists who argue that children have “a marked intolerance for postponement of gratification and an intense insensitivity to the length of separations” (Davis, 1996, p. 352). A sudden change in parent figures can be a harmful disruption to the child’s development. It may discourage the child by reinforcing ideas that they are unwanted or an inconvenience. It may take a while for children to adjust to and develop emotional ties with other parental figures who may assume guardianship following a parent’s arrest. This reinforces theories which suggest that, “children need, above all else, to be under the exclusive authority and constant care of a primary psychological parent” (Davis, 1996, p. 352). The general consensus amongst psychological parenting theorists is that childhood, as it is, is a painful and challenging time for children. Therefore, stable and uninterrupted support from parental figures is crucial at this stage.

Separation from a parent through incarceration can leave children with awkward feelings of loss or abandonment. Children may struggle to rationalize their parents’ sudden departure from home. Unlike loss through death, which is permanent, loss through incarceration can be perplexing, because although the parent is physically absent, they are still there psychologically, through prison visits or telephonically. Theorists, like Boss (1999, 2004,

2006) refer to this as a combination of ambiguity and loss. He states that such loss could be theorised as ambiguous loss and could cause children to internalise their emotions and display negative psychological symptoms after the incarceration. The strain on the child may be exacerbated by a lack of support, understanding, or information regarding parental incarceration and the subsequent loss experienced by the child. It is this lack of knowledge, which often tempts parents, guardians, or caregivers to misinform the child of the imprisoned parent's whereabouts. Children are frequently uninformed or are lead to believe that the parent has moved away for some reason or the other, such as work or study. However, Parke and Clarke-Steward (2002, p. 4) assert that this deception or "conspiracy of silence" actually causes children to become more anxious and fearful about the welfare of their parent, encumbering their ability to effectively deal with their loss.

The trends in gender-related patterns of incarceration summon investigation into the impact of incarceration on the mother-child versus father-child relationship. Mackintosh *et al.*, (2006, p. 582) state that, "though fathers are more likely to be imprisoned, the impact on children tends to be greater when it is their mother who is incarcerated." Prior to incarceration, it is more common to find children living with their mothers. These mothers often assume the role of the primary caregiver and financial provider. Thus, when parental incarceration occurs, it is more probable for children to experience separation from their mother rather than their father. Children of female prisoners are likely to experience greater disruptions to their care giving (Cunningham, 2001), including change of guardians, residency and even separation from siblings.

In a study conducted by Hagan (1996), it was established that the consequences of parental incarceration was greater for the children of female prisoners. The study argued that the children of female prisoners had a higher tendency to exhibit problems associated with parental absence. These include diminished self-esteem, underachievement, and social problems. These risks are elevated when the child bears witness to the mother's arrest. According to Johnson (1991, cited in Parke & Clarke-Steward, 2002) one in every five children is present and witnesses the arrest of their parent. Children who witness a mother's arrest may suffer nightmares and flashbacks to the traumatic incident, which could also lead to serious mental health issues later on in life. In other instances, children may return to an empty home unaware of their parent's arrest, resulting in feelings of abandonment and rejection. Previous research has also shown that the arrest of a mother is often associated with



“acting in” behaviour, or internalising feelings whereas the absence of a father leads to “acting out” behaviour (Fritsch & Burkhead, 1981, cited in Johnson, 2007, p. 6). However, it must be established that literature in this respect is limited, therefore the impact of a mother versus father arrest remains largely unknown and requires greater attention in future research.

Whilst it is apparent that the imprisonment of a mother can have a significant impact on the child, the consequences of separation caused by a father’s imprisonment cannot be ignored. As mentioned earlier, due to the general severity of their crimes, fathers tend to serve longer sentences than mothers usually do, and the effect of this lengthier period of separation can be detrimental for the relationship between father and child (Gadsden & Rethemeyer, 2001). There are many studies, which outline adverse outcomes associated with paternal incarceration. For instance, survey by Bor, McGee and Fagan (2004) revealed a striking connection between paternal incarceration and delinquent behaviours. A more recent study conducted by Wildeman (2010) found that when boys had a father in prison, they were more inclined to display aggressive behaviours. Though many fathers do not reside with their children prior to the arrest, some still offer emotional and financial support, guidance, discipline, and supervision of their children (Christian, 2005; Hairston, 1998, 2003; Rodriguez, Smith & Zatz, 2000, & Sharp & Marcus-Mendoza, 2001, cited in Poehlmann *et al.*, 2010). These variations in paternal involvement make it difficult to assess the degree to which parental incarceration affects the child. In light of the above, there is a probability that the gender of the incarcerated parent would present varying outcomes for the child but the extent to which paternal or maternal incarceration contributes directly to negative outcomes has not been specified through research. Tasca *et al.*, (2011) clarify that although paternal and maternal incarceration does have unique influences on the child, there are limited comparative studies into differences between the two. Additionally, existing studies do not capture all the other pre-existing factors, which may trigger adverse reactions to a parent’s imprisonment.

Separation is aggravated when children are deprived of intimate contact with their incarcerated parent. Although there are systems in place for contact such as telephone calls and visitation hours, these are not always accessible, especially for children. Many children do not have access to telephones or calls may be restricted by connection costs. In other instances, unenthusiastic or unsupportive gatekeepers who must bear the costs of these calls may discourage telephonic contact.

Seymour (1998) discovered that nearly half of all parents in correctional facilities receive no visits from their children whilst the other half report infrequent visitation patterns. This may be linked to several concerns regarding prison visitation. Apprehensions relate to issues such as the duration and distance of parent-child separation. Although most prisons provide for family visitation, it is not encouraged or promoted by either prisons or caregivers. Vacca (2008) believes that correctional systems tend to view inmates as undeserving or unwilling to maintain contact with their children. For caregivers, it is possible that the geographical proximity, travel costs, and time needed for visits will be problematic and therefore contribute to the loss of contact between parent and child. Cunningham (2001) adds that travelling to geographically distant prisons may be a financial deterrent to caregivers who may already find themselves in a compromising financial position due to the incarceration. Even when visitation is possible, it may also be disregarded for fear of the adverse effect of the “unsterile or uncomfortable visitation rooms, child-unfriendly visitation rules, or concerns that prison is not the right place for a child” (Nesmith & Ruhland, 2008, p. 1121). Visitation times may overlap with school hours or be hindered by red tape, such as documented proof of parenthood. In some cases, for safety, their own personal reasons or fear of exposure, the caregivers, and remaining parents, especially mothers, may discourage visitation. Caregivers, in some instances, may feel it psychologically damaging for the child to be visiting a prison and are therefore unwilling to make provision for visitation. In some cases, the incarcerated parent may be reluctant to see their children whilst in prison or the child may opt to forgo visits in an attempt to avoid further disappointment.

### ***2.3.2 Pre-existing contextual factors and impending changes***

To understand the true impact of incarceration, it is important to determine the pre-existing nature of the family prior to the arrest. The incarceration of a parent is rarely the onset of problems for the child but rather a continuation of an already challenging home situation, often characterized by limited education, poverty, social disadvantage, unstable family unit, substance abuse, psychological problems, abuse, neglect, trauma and societal belligerence (Kjellstrand & Eddy, 2011a; 2011b). This combination of difficulties exposes the child to multiple risks, which is only exacerbated by parental imprisonment (Poehlmann, 2005). A growing body of research indicates that these pre-existing factors are often predictors for higher occurrences of emotional, social, and psychological problems in children.



The impact of incarceration would have different meanings and consequences for children who do, or do not reside with their parents prior to the arrest. It is therefore important to consider guardianship before and after the arrest. When children live with both biological parents before the imprisonment, it is likely that the incarceration will alter their living arrangements. When fathers are imprisoned children generally continue residing with their mothers, but since the mother is often the primary caregiver, the ramifications of maternal incarceration on residential instability are most pronounced (Huebner & Gustafson, 2007; Tasca *et al.*, 2011). In most cultures, mothers assume the role of nurturer and primary caregiver for her children. Often, when this nurturer is removed from the home, the children are likely to lose all biological guardianship and find placement with family, friends or foster care. This suggests that maternal incarceration usually results in greater guardianship changes and residential instability, implying that a mother's incarceration could potentially be more disturbing than that of a father (Tasca *et al.*, 2011). Whether it is the mother or father who is arrested, theorists quoted in Davis (1996, p. 352) saw any changes in parent figures as,

“hurtful interruptions” in the child's development that would lead it to “regress... along the whole line of affections, skills, achievements, and social adaptations.” They argued that children lack the capacity to “maintain... positive emotional ties with a number of different individuals [who are] unrelated.

However, research also shows that children were more likely to be living with non-parental guardians or single mothers even prior to the incarceration (Parke & Clarke Steward, 2002). This implies that the child would have undergone a change in guardianship prior to the arrest.

With this in mind, it is important to consider the changes in guardianship that sometimes occurs even before the incarceration and the circumstances surrounding those changes. Criminal offenders usually have a complex set of needs relating to substance abuse and education, which predisposes them and their children to criminality even before the incarceration (Phillips, Erkanli, Keeler, Costello & Angold, 2006). Addiction, lack of education, poverty and social disadvantage are challenges to parental stability and child rearing practices. Therefore, in many instances, a host of family problems such as family discord, substance abuse or criminal behaviour may precede parental incarceration (Nesmith & Ruhland, 2008). Imprisoned parents are likely to have endured prolonged trauma and limited coping skills, which may have adverse influences on their parent-child relationship. In

all probability, imprisonment would further diminish these relationships and cause greater alienation between the parent and child. The impact of this estrangement is largely influenced by the parent-child relationship prior to incarceration. We have already established that most children live with their mothers rather than fathers prior to the arrest, so it can be assumed that these children would have already been exposed to at least one change in guardianship before the incarceration took place. In addition, the nature of the child's relationship with non-resident parents is also of importance. Parke and Clarke-Steward (2002) iterate that the incarceration of a parent has the potential to disrupt patterns between both resident and non-resident parents, and therefore these issues also merit examination in studies pertaining to parental incarceration.

The incarceration of a parent may necessitate significant changes in the living arrangements for the rest of the family. Children may experience passage from caregiver to caregiver, separation from their siblings and changes in schools and teachers (Mackintosh *et al.*, 2006). Parke and Clarke-Steward (2002) explain that a child's life can be greatly disrupted by relocation and residency with alternative caregivers. A result of these changes is the development of emotional or psychological problems, manifesting in aggression, withdrawal and academic difficulties (Mackintosh *et al.*, 2006). Living arrangements following parental incarceration sometimes depends on the family structure prior to the incarceration. When fathers are incarcerated, children usually live with their mothers but when a mother is arrested, children are more likely to move in with another relative other than the father.

Changes in care giving arrangements can present varying outcomes for the child but this is often dependent on whom the alternative caregiver is. For instance, living with the remaining parent can often aggravate stress related to the incarceration of a partner. Prisoner's partners may be left feeling depressed, overworked, lonely and financially burdened by the pressure of single parenting and childcare (Murray *et al.*, 2012). At times, this is aggravated by economic hardship and residential instability. Following the removal of one parent from the family unit, is some major restructuring to routines and family dynamics. Children find themselves supervised less often and important parent-child contact time may be sacrificed.

To avoid further disruptions, relatives sometime prefer keeping children within the family unit. Research suggests advantages to living with kin; it gives the child a greater sense of safety, love, and support than being in foster care, and it is more likely that kinship caregivers

would facilitate contact with the incarcerated parent (Hairston, 1999; Grant, Gordon & Cohen *et al.*, 1997). However, in comparison to foster care, there are some disadvantages to kinship care too, particularly if the caregivers are older, poorer, and lacking in education. Although grandparents may gain a sense of purpose in caring for their grandchildren, this added responsibility may also cause unnecessary stress for the old folk in terms of “finances, balancing employment with family responsibilities, providing health care, and dealing with the school system” (Clopton & East, 2008, p. 196), and this may hinder the provision of effective care giving. Other relatives are generally reluctant or unprepared for the added responsibility. Caregivers might feel stressed out with the ‘burden’ of taking care of another person’s child. At the same time, caregivers also express concern or even frustration regarding the emotional and behavioural problems that these children sometimes exhibit. Children can sometimes detect feelings of anger, disappointment, and resentment harboured by their caregiver toward them or their incarcerated parent, which results in feelings of guilt and even anger towards their parent or caregiver.

Residential instability, changes in family dynamics, and the collapse of the family unit often follow parental incarceration. Separation from parents and changeovers from guardians, residency, school and friends can sever the parent-child relationship. Children who are exposed to multiple caregivers struggle to develop healthy emotional ties with them. Children who experience change of homes and schools may also feel the strain of economic hardship felt by the caregiver or parent (Hairston, 2003; Kampfner, 1995; Tasca *et al.*, 2011). Tasca *et al.*, (2011) believe that sudden changes in residency can inflict significant strain and disruptions in a child’s life, interrupting familiar routines related to schooling, friends, and family dynamics. Although these risk factors may be exacerbated by parental incarceration, many also exist as pre-incarceration risks and as such, they cannot be regarded as a definite outcome of imprisonment.

### **2.3.3 Economic deprivation**

Changes in family composition due to incarceration sometimes lead to economic instability in the home. If the incarcerated parent had been previously employed, this loss of income can cause financial strain on the family. There are instances where fathers, whether residing at home or not, do provide some form of financial assistance for their children. Their incarceration would mean a loss of this financial contribution. Bloom (1995, cited in Miller, 2006) believes that the loss of a mother’s income may have even greater consequences for the

family. In many cases, most offenders come from largely impoverished backgrounds and many incarcerated mothers are single parents, the sole providers for their families. The children are likely to continue to live impoverished lives after the incarceration since incarcerated fathers can no longer pay maintenance for them and government makes limited financial provision for the children of offenders (Miller, 2006).

Since criminality is generally higher among disadvantaged communities, it is probable that parental incarceration would be more prominent in low-income families. Western (2006) agrees that incarceration would be rife among the young and poorly educated. Therefore, incarceration can further impede the children who live in unsafe neighbourhoods, attend underprivileged schools, eat unhealthily, and receive poor, if any, health care (Geller Garfinkel, Cooper & Mincy, 2009). A parent's imprisonment can place children at greater risk of having unmet needs. Economic deprivation may also cause instability in the home as families are forced to change residence and as mentioned earlier, this means reducing contact with family, friends, and other support structures, which may be vital coping mechanisms for the already traumatised child.

#### ***2.3.4 Impact on the child's functioning***

Children of prisoners are at risk for negative social, emotional, and psychological outcomes (Poehlmann *et al.*, 2010). It is highly likely that they are also pre-disposed to additional risks in their environment. As a result, parental incarceration and the associated separation, domestic changes and economic instability, which follow, can adversely affect child development. Aaron and Dallaire (2010) believe that all these risks can be associated with child maladjustment, including depression and poor academic performance. Exposure to more stressors than the average child is a precursor for negative outcomes and results in a group of vulnerable children who are at greater risk for poor developmental outcomes. However, negative outcomes are not inevitable and there are those children who display resiliency and positive developmental outcomes despite their adversities.

Parental incarceration can result in behavioural and emotional responses from children. These include fear and anxiety, depression, physical health issues or regressive behaviours such as bed-wetting (Cunningham, 2001). Children may feel somewhat responsible or guilty, believing they may have contributed to their parent's criminality. This can result in feelings of anger, guilt, shame, isolation and confusion about their parent's criminality. In some

instances, the child may be deeply distressed about their parent's welfare and safety. A study by Johnston (1995) found that all of the above stressors could have significant influence over the normal developmental stages and growth milestones of a child. He concluded that the trauma of parental incarceration could result in aggressive behaviour, learning difficulties and even maladaptive behaviour patterns in children. The changes effected by imprisonment can cause children to develop negative perceptions of the justice system and even develop anti-authoritarian attitudes, significantly influencing the child's schooling and relationships with teachers and other authority figures (Cunningham, 2001).

As mentioned earlier, parental incarceration can be conceptualised as both a risk marker and a risk mechanism for children, as such, it is likely to have both direct and indirect effects on the child's well-being. Research shows that children usually feel compelled to keep their parent's incarceration a secret (Nesmith & Ruhland, 2008). Feelings of guilt and embarrassment can cause some children to withdraw socially, avoiding any discussions or social stigma related to the incarceration. Children may become victims of social stigmatisation, not because of a trait they personally possess but because of their affiliation with their parent (Phillips & Gates, 2011). Miller (2006) states that cultural factors may also determine the way in which children are stigmatised. For example, in crime-infested neighbourhoods, where criminality is the norm, social stigma is lessened, but the child may be aware of the social stigma attached to incarceration and may therefore opt to conceal information about their parent's absence. Researchers believe that this form of 'forced silence' could potentially increase trauma in children. According to Kampfner (1995), this may result in insomnia, concentration problems, and depression. These children also tend to feel as if they have a lack of support in discussing their emotions regarding the incarceration.

Children may feel ashamed by their parent's actions, thinking that others may reject or judge them unfairly. Rejection from family and friends is particularly damaging for their already fragile socio-emotional state and in order to protect themselves, they may withdraw from any meaningful relationships. As mentioned earlier, it is not uncommon for children to blame themselves for their parent's criminality. This is especially true when the parent had been forced to resort to crime as a means of providing for their family. Miller (2006) believes that when feelings of culpability are harboured for long periods of time and without counsel, it could have significant long-term effects on the child's development.



Research shows that children experiencing psychological problems manifest their emotions through “maladaptive or contumacious behaviours such as withdrawing emotionally in school, truancy, pregnancy, drug abuse, diminished academic performance and disruptive behaviour” (Miller, 2006, p. 478). They may resort to social clichés, which could worsen their behaviour. This may lead to delinquent behaviour and gang involvement, placing them at greater risk for juvenile detention. McQuiade and Ehrenreich (1998) believe that the children of today are at risk of inter-generational incarceration. A recent study by Johnson (2007) concurs that the children of inmates have a pre-disposition to inter-generational imprisonment and according to Mumola (2000) nearly half of the youth in juvenile detention have or have had a parent imprisoned.

Unlike the death of a parent, which is permanent, separation due to incarceration is bewildering for the child. They may not know how to grieve for their loss of a parent who is absent, yet still alive. Miller (2006) posits that this can result in both long-term psychological problems and short-term changes such as loss of appetite or speech after the imprisonment. As mentioned earlier children may become depressed, anxious and there have been cases of “post traumatic stress syndrome analogous to children whose parents have died” (Breen, 1995, cited in Miller, 2006, p. 478).

Research is limited on the varying effects of incarceration on boys and girls, however, it is believed that boys tend to be more adversely affected since they are generally more susceptible to stress than girls (Parke & Clarke-Steward, 2002). A few studies link anti-social behaviours in boys to parental incarceration, but these conclusions cannot be deemed valid without taking into account other external risk factors, such as violent neighbourhoods, parental drug abuse and so on. Unfortunately, the research base on this subject is unclear and we cannot assume that one is more adversely affected than the other is, but as alluded to earlier, boys and girls have different means of expressing their emotions; boys externalise and girls internalise feelings. Therefore, although they may very well be affected by the incarceration, their coping strategies may also be quite different.

Miller (2006) cites a number of studies, which outline the psychological problems children of incarcerated parents face. These include cognitive setbacks, developmental delays and inadequate coping mechanisms. They may have difficulty reaching developmental tasks such as developing relationships, “...trust, autonomy, initiative, productivity and identity”

(Seymour 1998, cited in Miller, 2006, p. 478). When their challenges exceed the child's ability to cope, it can cause significant developmental delays but this is not to say that their issues cannot be overcome if they are afforded the appropriate support-structures, coping mechanisms and resources.

### **2.3.5 Impact on Education**

Separation, residential and economic instability and emotional turmoil resulting from a parent's incarceration are likely to trigger school-related problems. During the incarceration, children may be passed from caregiver to caregiver; they may have to change schools, friends and teachers as well. Such changes can initiate certain psychological or emotional problems. Research shows that 50% of the children of prisoners displayed problems such as poor academic performance, withdrawn behaviour and aggression, albeit these problems were relatively short term (Parke & Clarke-Steward, 2002). Other school-based problems include teasing and exclusion from peer groups as a result of the incarceration. The difficulties experienced place these children at greater risk for academic difficulties and diminished cognitive functioning at school level. As children reach higher grades, incidences of suspensions and dropping out of school increases (Trice, 1997, cited in Myers, Smarsh, Amlund-Hagen, & Kennon, 1999).

## **2.4 Main findings from literature**

The following are themes found through the analysis of literature:

### *Absence of a parent (c.f. 2.3.1)*

The first and perhaps the most imminent challenge facing the children of incarcerates comes from being separated from their parent (Parke & Clarke-Steward, 2002). The child may experience significant difficulties in adjusting to the absence of a parent, particularly if that parent had been the primary care-giver (Tasca *et al.*, 2011). Other circumstances such as home placement and financial pressures may restrict parent-child contact during imprisonment. Therefore, the quality of parent-child relationships prior to arrest is crucial to the child's adjustment. Miller (2006) believes that contact with the incarcerated parent during imprisonment may help the child deal with the difficulties and uncertainties they may have concerning the incarceration. A lack of parent-child contact can result in the severing of family bonds therefore, if the existing relationship between parent and child was positive,

caregivers should preserve this contact through frequent visitation with parents. Understandably, this can be very demanding on caregivers and there will be instances where strict prison visitation rules inhibit such contact. However, it is expected that children be safeguarded against abusive or unstable parents.

#### *Challenge of adjusting to changing family structures (c.f. 2.3.2)*

A further challenge is adjusting to changing familial and home structures, which could easily take a toll on the young child. Children are likely to adjust better to parental incarceration when they have developed quality bonds with their extended family and other support or social networks. These structures become very valuable especially when fathers are imprisoned and mothers left to cope with children alone. Parke and Clarke-Steward (2002, p. 8) highlight the importance of kinship placement, with relatives or grandparents, which “tends to be more stable and avoid[s] trans-ethnic discontinuities that are likely to occur in the foster care system.” They theorise that children do adjust better in kinship homes, but acknowledge the absence of any comparative research data in support of this theory. In many instances, grandparents assume responsibility for the child. This is beneficial since most children already have close relationships with their grandparents and the transition to a new household would be less traumatic.

#### *Challenges of economic deprivation (c.f. 2.3.3)*

Pre-existing financial instability or economic deprivation linked to the incarceration can severely influence the lifestyle of children. Unless their placement is in stable homes, they will continue to struggle, at times ending up on the wrong side of the law themselves. The effects these challenges can have on the young child are colossal and include stigmatisation, rejection, maladaptive behaviours, cognitive setbacks, and developmental delays, all of which may manifest in different ways for different children.

#### *Developmental and Psychological challenges (c.f. 2.3.4.)*

Learners who have parents in prison fear rejection, abandonment, and stigmatisation. As a result, they may be unwilling to reveal or share their thoughts and feelings with others, even those who might be in a position to assist them. The physical separation from a parent may manifest itself in expressions of grief and sadness, developmental regressions and inhibited cognitive processes whereby learners struggle to control their own behaviour. This can become problematic in the school setting, often harming academic performance and the



formation of constructive relationships with peers (Petsch & Rochlen, 2009). It is not uncommon for younger children to display an unwillingness to go to school or what Vacca (2008, p. 51) calls “temporary school phobias”, where they might refuse to attend school for anything from four to six weeks following the incarceration. Moreover, Parke and Clarke-Steward (2002) highlight an increase in school-related problems, falling grades, and increasingly disruptive behaviours. They are more susceptible to exclusion and ridicule from other learners. These children are also at risk of substance abuse, which may be an outlet for their feelings and emotions. Trice (1997, cited in Parke & Clarke-Steward, 2002) explains that these factors may also compel truancy, suspension, early pregnancy, dropouts and even juvenile incarceration.

#### Challenges at school (c.f. 2.3.5)

Learners could potentially exhibit school-related and other socio-emotional problems linked to their parent’s incarceration. Vacca (2008) recognises the overwhelming array of reactions these children face within the school system; these include poor academic performance, aggressive behaviour, and absenteeism. These could be linked to any one of the experiences mentioned earlier and could be temporary or long-term.

### **2.5 Research on school-based intervention strategies**

Everyone, from teachers, counsellors, caregivers to school administrators has the potential to make a positive impact in the lives of children who have parents in prison. Research suggests a number of intervention strategies, which may be adopted at school level. Firstly, staff will benefit from changing their own attitudes and personal biases concerning incarceration. Most schools are multicultural and staff may have varying perceptions of crime and criminology but by acknowledging their own cultural biases, staff can have an influence on how other children perceive the children of offenders. For example, being cautious in how they portray criminal offences: “good guys and bad guys” (Clopton & East, 2008, p. 197). Petsch and Rochlen (2009) suggest that staff familiarise themselves with the customs and practices of different ethnic, religious and racial groups so that they themselves are equipped in dealing with a diverse range of needs. It is also important to realise that these children are likely to come from poor living conditions, which may make learning more of a challenge for them. Recognizing that these children may have a range of socioeconomic and multicultural needs could assist staff in promoting a better learning environment for the child and can easily

influence the way in which other learners “react, communicate and behave toward children with incarcerated parents” (Vacca, 2008). Educators ought to be aware of social stigmas and intervene as and when derision by other learners takes place.

Teachers are important role-players in identifying and meeting the needs of vulnerable learners. The way in which they approach their daily interaction with children could potentially affect the learner’s attitudes, behaviours, and well-being. Children need to feel comfortable enough to discuss their home situation with educators without feeling judged. Therefore, teachers should provide developmentally appropriate information regarding incarceration and create classrooms, which address the individual needs of every learner. They should encourage learners to be open about their experiences and emotions. Teachers may also be required to gain awareness of the associated risks linked to parental incarceration and develop intervention programmes to avoid such risks. Teachers must also recognise that visitations with a parent in prison may also be stressful for children. They may come to school tired and physically drained after the whole visitation experience. Others may have found the experience frightening, awkward, or frustrating displaying behavioural reactions to the visit. Educators should be prepared to deal with the probable “excitability or hyperactivity” caused by the visit (Johnston, 1995, p. 139).

Secondly, trust issues resulting from abandonment may cause learners to engage in attention seeking or defiant behaviours. Staff should engage learners in activities, which promote trust. It may be useful to encourage positive alternatives for dealing with anger, fear, rejection and shame. In addition, professionals can help children make meaning out of the situation their parents are going through. This could be portrayed through stories and drawings where incidences are given greater perspective, giving learners the opportunity to understand and relate to the events they have encountered (Petsch & Rochlen, 2009). It is also important that teachers maintain trust with caregivers as well, and respect their decisions regarding disclosure or non-disclosure to children. If incarceration starts to become an issue at school, then only should educators communicate this with the caregiver. Establishing trust between educator and caregiver is important and it provides an opportunity for caregivers to receive support and guidance in providing for the child’s needs.

Thirdly, schools should utilize a variety of methods to collect data, maintain records, and gain awareness of what is transpiring in the learner’s lives. This is useful for designing and

implementing appropriate intervention programmes which cater for the individual needs of learners. Schools are usually inadequately prepared in terms of the resources and tools they have to assist learners and it thus becomes important that strong partnerships be developed with caregivers and the community as well. Building school and community partnerships are thus the fourth form of school-based support. Vacca (2008) states that community partnerships is not only useful in providing resources to assist learners but it is also a vital agency for eliminating the stigmas and stereotypes associated with parental incarceration. These partnerships are crucial for creating and providing support systems to assist the learners and their families.

Lastly, it is important that the school environment becomes one that is committed to the provision of quality education whilst also respecting the rights of learners and their parents. Staff can reduce the stigmas around incarceration by creating a positive learning environment. It begins with the school's mission and values, which embrace diversity and the provision of quality education for all. Petsch and Rochlen (2009, p. 17) recommend the preparation of specific lessons which advocate "awareness, acceptance and respect among students from all backgrounds". Vacca (2008) also believes that the formulation of strong mentoring programmes and peer support groups may be useful in providing the child with a consistent, supportive, and trustworthy adult presence in the absence of their parents.

## **2.6 Limitations of studies on parental incarceration**

During the 1990's and 2000's there was a steady growth in literature on parental incarceration. This early literature, however, was criticized for several reasons, including "the anecdotal nature of data, lack of comparison groups, a dearth of longitudinal studies, overreliance on parental reports of children's behaviours, and underutilization of standardised child assessment tools" (Gabel, 1992; Hagan & Dinovitzer, 1999; Johnston, 1995, cited in Johnson & Easterling, 2012, p. 344). In recent years, researchers have attempted to address some of these issues, but very few have been able to eliminate problems related to selection bias. Children of prisoners differ from other children on a number of levels. Pre-existing factors, familial, economic, and social backgrounds make it difficult to ascertain whether their problems are a direct result of the incarceration or other adversities in the child's ecology (Johnson & Easterling, 2012). Often, important aspects of actual experiences of the child are not examined even though these factors may also have a direct bearing on the

child's functioning and behaviours (Aaron & Dallaire, 2010). In addition, there are few longitudinal studies, which assess these children and their families over a length of time such as the periods before the arrest, during the hearing of a court trial, during incarceration and after release (Hagan, 1996). These deficiencies make it difficult to determine exactly which phase may or may not have triggered changes in the child.

There is a gap in knowledge on pre-disposition and family dynamics prior to incarceration. Little is known about the impact of family instability before and after imprisonment and the influence this has on children's behaviours (Tasca *et al.*, 2011). Moreover, there is a dearth of studies which consider guardianship and care giving for the child following a parent's arrest (Mackintosh *et al.*, 2006). There is also a shortage of differentiating empirical research into maternal and paternal incarceration and the resultant effects on the child. For instance, few studies have included the effects of a mother's incarceration on a child's socio-emotional development as opposed to that of a father's imprisonment (Mackintosh *et al.*, 2006). In most cases, this research is based on anecdotal accounts based on secondary analysis and does not include the lived experiences of the child. Existing research rarely examines the impact of parental incarceration from the perspective of the child. Children's views commonly found in sources such as newspapers or internet support groups provide limited, non-empirical data on the phenomenon. In research, most data on child experiences have been drawn from adult sources, having been based on observations rather than the emotional experiences of the child. This gap in literature makes it difficult to examine the coping strategies and familial support available to children under such circumstances and it fails to link developmental, familial, or contextual factors to parental incarceration or with children's outcomes (Poehlmann *et al.*, 2010).

The lack of systematic documentation of the precise number of children affected by parental incarceration makes it difficult to determine the exact number of children affected. Existing studies have been compared against international samples and has drawn attention to the collateral consequences of parental incarceration (Tasca *et al.*, 2011). Generalising effects throughout the world presents difficulties in that each country has its own unique capital punishment systems. Therefore, significant contextual factors that could influence research on parental incarceration may require analysis that is more specific.

There are limited studies that examine the association between parental incarceration and children's educational performance. However, several other small-scale studies have begun to mention links between the two components. These studies however remain limited in terms of sample size, design methodologies, and a lack of comparison groups.

## **2.7 Theoretical framework**

This study rests on several theories, one being the *Psychological Parenting Theory* (Davis, 1996), which argues that a child may be severely harmed by any form of separation from a parent. Davis mentioned such scholars as Joseph Goldstein, Anna Freud and Albert J. Solnit, all of whom agree that the child needs uninterrupted contact with a psychological parent. The psychological parenting theory posits that children react adversely to separation from a parent and may often regress in terms of "...affections, skills, achievements and social adaptations" (Davis, 1996, p. 352). Psychological parenting theorists believe that positive interaction with parents stimulates growth and development, and it is therefore imperative that this contact remains constant and uninterrupted. They mention different consequences of parent-child separation at various stages of development. School-age children may develop feelings of abandonment, which sometimes results in anti-social or even criminal behaviour. Separation may inhibit a child's attainment of "individual identity" (Davis, 1996, p. 353). Since parental incarceration does separate a child from their parent, it would be interesting to see if the consequences of parent-child separation still exist even when the presence of a parent poses a threat to the stability and safety of the child.

From a developmental perspective, Bowlby's (1982) *attachment theory* provides a framework for understanding the importance of the development of relationships between the parent and child, and the socio-emotional functions that these relationships serve over time. Many children experience parental incarceration while they are still in the process of developing primary attachments with their parents. The attachment theory draws special attention to the severing effect that separation, such as parental incarceration, can have on the parent-child relationship (Poehlmann *et al.*, 2010). This theory offers a plausible premise for why the children of prisoners may exhibit signs of internalising problems linked to physical separation and disrupted attachments (Johnson & Easterling, 2012). Previous research has shown that the quality of early attachment is a good predictor of socio-emotional functioning at later developmental stages (Poehlmann *et al.*, 2010) and that children tend to respond



positively when secure attachment with a parent has been developed (Parke & Clarke-Steward, 2002). However, once attachment has been established, separation from the parent can trigger a range of emotional reactions including anger, worry, and sadness, which can encumber the optimal development of the child. This is consistent with some of the emotions that attachment theory would link to separation from a parent in general, although there are still some factors that distinguish separation due to parental incarceration from other forms of parent-child separation (Murray & Murray, 2010). Parke and Clarke-Steward (2002) explain that children can develop multiple attachments, not only to mothers, but to fathers and caregivers as well. Father-child attachment differs from mother-child attachment and one may want to assess the child's reactions when a specific parent or both are incarcerated (Parke & Clarke-Steward, 2002). In contrast, where insecure or dysfunctional attachments have been established with parents, the child's reactions to imprisonment might be quite different (Thompson, 2008).

Attachment theorists believe that the children of prisoners would benefit from the formation of new, secure attachments; this involves a combination of care-giving interactions in the home and on-going contact with the incarcerated parent (Poehlmann *et al.*, 2010). Parke and Clarke-Steward (2002, p. 18) suggest that, "children who 'lose' their relationship with an incarcerated parent can be helped by forming or maintaining a secure attachment relationship with another caregiver". Their suggestion was based on a previous study by Howes and Hamilton (1993), involving children who had insecure attachments with their mothers. Of those children, those who had developed secure attachments to a day-care provider appeared to be more socially competent than those children who lacked any compensatory attachment outside the family. Therefore, insight into the quality of children's attachments to alternate caregivers such as guardians, grandparents, teachers and older siblings, is of great importance.

Although attachment theorists do suggest some ways in which parental incarceration may differ from other forms of separation (Murray & Murray, 2010), another study outlining the differences between children who were separated from parents through incarceration to those separated for other reasons found only a few differences between the two groups (Poehlmann, Park, Bouffious, Abrahams, Schlafer & Han, 2008). So whether this is a limitation on the theory itself, may be an avenue for discussion at some point in the treatise.

The *Strain Theory* considers the effect imprisonment might have if the parent had been a positive force in the child's life prior to the arrest. In this case, Hagan (1996) believes that parental incarceration may actually intensify existing strains or introduce even more strain on the child's life. Agnew (2006, as cited in Johnson & Easterling, 2012, p. 350) defines strain as "...the events or conditions that an individual dislikes." He also points out that the way in which these conditions are controlled, significantly shapes the child's reaction to it. Strains may include family breakdown and residential or financial instability. Agnew (1992) believes that these additional stressors can lead to delinquency, high-risk behaviours, and even criminality. Hagan (1996) points out that this is probable even in households where parents had been separated prior to the arrest. He explains that many children have frequent contact with non-resident parents, and even though the child may be separated from the parent in that sense, the parental contribution and parent-child relationship still exists despite the residential nature of the relationship. The loss of this relationship, in some cases, may lead to loss of financial contributions as well as the general, intangible contributions parents make in the lives of their children. McLanahan and Bumpass (1988, as cited in Hagan, 1996) add that the remaining parent is often left in a powerless role, with limited time and finances to invest in the child. The implications of parental incarceration are thus not only economic but also mean the loss of family relationships which play a significant role in developing a child emotionally and socially.

The loss of a parent due to incarceration also presents functional consequences for the child, in terms of added responsibilities in the home. Children may have to sacrifice their childhood and take on adult responsibilities in the absence of their parent. In extreme cases, they may have to assume additional jobs to supplement income in the home. This can inflict unnecessary strain on a child, causing adverse reactions to the imprisonment. Children emanating from dysfunctional families where violence and disadvantage preceded the arrest run the cumulative risk of strain (Hagan, 1996). This may leave children feeling overwhelmed and with a strong desire to escape their adversity, sometimes through inappropriate behaviours. This theory suggests that parental incarceration may present children with greater risks than other forms of parent-child separation. Thus, depending on the severity of risk the child was exposed to prior to the arrest, compounded by additional risks following the arrest, negative behaviours may vary in accordance with the intensity of adversity.



On the other hand, there is also a positive outcome for the strain theory. In cases where the parent had been more of a negative force; violent, negligent, abusive or generally dependent on the family, his or her imprisonment might actually relieve some strain on the family and the child. So when the parent is more of a burden or threat to the family, having them imprisoned might actually present positive outcomes for the family (Hagan, 1996). In both instances however, it is important to understand the relationship between the parent, family and child prior to the arrest in order to decipher whether their imprisonment might actually initiate positive or negative strain on the child. Hagan (1996, p. 31) puts forward an interesting thought in this regard, “possibly both versions of strain theory operate, sometimes even neutralizing one another’s effects. However, more likely, imprisonment harms children even in dysfunctional families because this specific loss of a parent compounds rather than mitigates pre-existing family problems.”

## **2.8 Conclusion**

The children of prisoners are often relatively indistinguishable but their plight is very real. Although the research shows that parental incarceration could be linked to negative social, emotional, psychological and academic outcomes, there is no concrete way to attest whether it is the incarceration itself, pre-disposition or post incarceration risk factors, which trigger problematic behaviours. Research shows that parental incarceration can have both positive and negative implications for the learner. It is not uncommon for professionals to overlook the reality that parental incarceration is a reality in many schools and that the implementation of positive intervention strategies is imperative to help the child overcome the many challenges they may face. By embracing the child despite their parent’s failures, with the help of the community and other support structures, schools can become a place of inspiration, motivation, and success for a child whose life may otherwise be surrounded by disappointment and failure.

This chapter presented and examined existing literature from various researchers on parental incarceration. Although there is a dearth of literature into the effects of parental incarceration on scholastic performance per se, I have attempted to examine all the other aspects of child development, which influence education and learning processes. Through this, I hoped to present a holistic picture of the many external factors, which contribute to the construction of

knowledge. Chapter three will furnish an in-depth account of the research methodologies and processes undertaken to formulate this study.

## **CHAPTER THREE**

### **RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

#### **3.1 Introduction**

This chapter offers a description of the research methodology and processes adopted to collect data from four school-going children who have a parent/s in prison. Since this study was designed to investigate the impact of parental incarceration on the child with particular focus on their scholastic experiences, a qualitative research methodology was used. The article presents the experiences of the child, obtained through verbal and textual data. Qualitative methods, in the form of in-depth, one-on-one interviews were employed to capture the essence of each child's unique experiences. These interviews enabled me to gain meaningful insights into how these children experience schooling after a parent's incarceration.

This study is guided by three research questions:

1. What are the schooling experiences of children who have a parent/s in prison?
2. How do these experiences affect their academic performance?
3. How can schools meet the needs of learners with parents in prison?

#### **3.2. Qualitative approach**

A qualitative research approach was selected for this particular study. Fossey, Harvey, Fossey *et al.*, (2002, p. 717) define qualitative research as “a broad umbrella term for research methodologies that describe and explain persons' experiences, behaviours, interactions and social contexts without the use of statistical procedures or quantifications.” Therefore, qualitative research can be understood as a systematic process of investigation aimed to achieve a deep understanding of a particular issue pertaining to the human world. Qualitative research comprises five major assumptions concerning the construction of knowledge (Higgs, Horsfall, & Grace, 2009, cited in Murray and Beglar, 2009). These include the belief that reality is constructed in a number of ways depending on each person's perceptions of reality. The investigator and participant are interdependent and both are changed through the process of inquiry. Knowledge is context and time dependent, searching for a deep understanding of the particular. In addition, it is more useful to illustrate and interpret events than to control

them to establish cause and effect and lastly, inquiry is “value bound”. Values appear, for instance, in how questions are asked and how results are interpreted.

Bogdan and Biklen (1982) present five key features thought to be essential to qualitative research. Firstly, qualitative research is naturalistic, aiming to understand where, when and how a particular phenomenon came into being and in order to gain thorough insight into the situation, subjects are best observed in their natural setting. Secondly, the use of descriptive data in the form of pictures or words rather than numbers is effective in illustrating and substantiating findings. A qualitative researcher takes nothing for granted and may include even arbitrary gestures or body language to enrich the data. Everything has the potential to provide a more detailed understanding of the phenomenon under study. Thirdly, qualitative researchers concern themselves with the process rather than outcomes of research. The aim is to gain thorough insight into the various perspectives that underlie the area of study, essentially to derive meaning beyond mere knowledge. Fourthly, qualitative research is inductive, theory is grounded in the data, and meaning is generated in a bottom-up rather than a top-down approach. Qualitative research finally attempts to derive meaning through the participant’s rather than the researcher’s perspective; this is ensured through feedback and liaison with participants throughout the research process.

Qualitative research was the favoured approach for this study because of its emphasis on in-depth investigations into the individually appreciated, lived experiences of each participant. Qualitative research is effective when researchers are striving to obtain a deeper understanding of the participant’s life, encompassing such factors as environment, socio-economic circumstances, life experiences, etc. (Cohen et al., 2011). Research of a qualitative nature seeks to obtain data which is presented and interpreted according to the participant’s individual experiences but where the researchers themselves become co-creators of meaning, making their own subjective contributions to the study as well. Therefore, rather than focus on an elusive phenomenon, qualitative research provides a range of frameworks for illuminating and understanding inter-personal as well as intra-personal relationships (Higgs, Horsfall, & Grace, 2009). The experiences of each participant, in the form of the spoken word, are held in higher esteem than quantification or analysis of data (Narain, 2005). This study endeavoured to understand the impact of parental incarceration on the well-being of the child, with particular focus on their scholastic experiences.

### ***Locating the study***

Research is usually located within a theoretical framework or worldview, often referred to as a “paradigm” (Mertens, 2009). There are several paradigms within which a study may exist, and this influences the way in which research is conducted, studied, and analysed (Mackenzie & Knipe, 2006). The paradigm informs the reader of the purpose and intentions of the researcher. This particular study was embedded within the interpretivist paradigm where emphasis is placed on the meaning of human interaction and experiences and where knowledge is gained by deriving meaning from the viewpoints of the participants involved (Fossey *et al.*, 2002). The intention was not to describe or predict human behaviours but simply to understand how people make meaning of the contexts in which they exist (Bertram *et al.*, 2010). For the participants in this study, that context was a life in which parental incarceration had separated them from a parent. In interpretivist studies, researchers understand that knowledge is dependent on the interpretation of data and that there is more than one reality or truth to a situation which according to Bertram *et al.*, (2010, p. 23) “...are historical, local, specific and non-generalisable”. To achieve this end, researchers must choose methods, which allow for interactions between researcher and participant, simply to engage the situation from the viewpoint of the participant.

### **3.3 Sample**

Fossey *et al.*, (2002) state that the primary concern with qualitative sampling is information richness, which is guided by two key considerations, these include appropriateness and adequacy of samples. It is important that the chosen participants are those who are best equipped to inform the study. The sensitive nature of this study called for purposive sampling in the selection of participants. In research, purposive sampling involves the deliberate selection of specific participants as they best illustrate the features or processes necessary for the particular area under study (Fouche & Delport, 2002; Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2011). According to Fossey *et al.*, (2002, p. 726) “qualitative research is described as purposive when it aims to select appropriate information sources to explore meanings... sampling may involve small numbers of participants, while the amount of data can be large.” Qualitative research does not concern itself with the number of participants but more with the depth of information gathered in order to fully describe the phenomenon. In this particular study, the carefully selected participants shared a wealth of information on their experiences.

The inclusion criteria for participants in this study were as follows: 1) participants must be older than 14 when the study begins; 2) must have a parent in prison at the start of the study; 3) the child must be attending school at the start of the study; and 4) both child and caregiver must be willing to participate.

With this in mind, four school-going children from KwaZulu-Natal participated in this study. At a local prison, several parents were approached with the intentions of the study. They were given time to consult with their children and, if the children were willing, they could participate in the study. Thereafter, guardians and caregivers were contacted for permission. The study initially recruited five participants but one was withdrawn due to extenuating circumstances. The participants were between the ages of 14 and 21, and all but one was in high school. The youngest participant (14 years) was in grade 6 at primary school level. Since the participants were all teenagers, they understood the intentions of the study and liberally shared their thoughts and experiences. The children's homes were all located in rural areas, but three attended schools in the suburbs. Their families belonged to the lower to middle socio-economic class.

The parents of children were identified through purposive sampling, as they were serving time at a local correctional facility. The prison itself was in close proximity, and with the assistance of a social worker at the prison, it was relatively easy to arrange meetings with the parents whenever necessary. Whilst they are in prison, the parents still maintain contact with their children, which meant they could determine whether they would be suitable candidates for the study or would be willing to participate in the study at all. The other participant studies at a local school where educators were aware of the circumstances, the parent was contacted and she granted permission and consent for participation.

The imprisoned parents consisted of three mothers and one father. All the imprisoned mothers as well as the guardians were aware of and consented to their child's participation in the study. The imprisoned dad was not informed, but the remaining parent, with whom the child resides, had granted permission for the study. Although the parents did not participate in the actual study, they were actively involved in the consultation process.

The participants consisted of three males and one female. Ages ranged from 14 to 21 years. The youngest participant is in grade 6, two others are doing grade 10 and the other is currently doing grade 12. Two participants reside with a remaining parent, one with the

mother and the other with a father. The other participants reside with single guardians, both female.

### ***Biographical information***

*Table A*

This information tabulated below should be read in conjunction with the individual responses of each learner as it provides more insight. In compliance with the stipulated confidentiality clause, the actual names of the participants have been omitted to protect their identities.

	<b>Gender</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Grade</b>	<b>School Type</b>	<b>Gender of Incarcerated Parent:</b>	<b>Currently Residing with:</b>
<b>Participant 1</b>	Female	17	11	All Girls	Female	Guardian
<b>Participant 2</b>	Male	21	10	Co-Education	Female	Father
<b>Participant 3</b>	Male	17	12	Co-Education	Female	Guardian
<b>Participant 4</b>	Male	14	6	Co-Education	Male	Mother

## **3.4 Instrumentation**

### **3.4.1 Research site**

This study involved school-going children living in KwaZulu-Natal. Three of the four participants live in deep rural settings. The interviews were conducted near their homes but at other locations chosen by the children. The venue itself had to be quiet and private. Since the children had the choice of venue, they were familiar with the setting and appeared quite relaxed during the interview process. All interviews were conducted face-to-face. All the children were second language English speakers but they all had fair command of the English language.

### **3.4.2 Research Style**

#### ***Life histories***

Since this study focused on the unique experiences of specific individuals, the life history style of research seemed appropriate. Cassell and Symon (2004) explain that life histories focus on the way in which people describe their experiences or actions in the social world



over time. It involves a subjective interpretation of situations in which people find themselves and is based on the assumption that “if men define those situations as real, they are real in their consequences” (Thomas, 1996, p. 300 quoted in Cassell & Symon, 2004, p. 34). This method views and makes meaning of experiences through the eyes, explanations, and interpretations of the individual. As such, it is particularly useful in gathering information on the changes in the material and social networks within which people construct their lives.

Cassel and Symon (2004) state that the life history method is firmly established in the interpretive paradigm, believing that the world is socially constructed and that understanding and meaning is established in and through social interactions. They elaborate that,

Through the processes of symbolic interaction, different groups come to create and maintain different worlds, but these worlds are not static. Rather, they are fluid and dynamic, colliding and overlapping, continually being created and re-created, changing as the objects that compose them are changed in meaning. Thus, the reflexivity of human beings is central to this perspective and it is this process of reflexivity, how human beings theorise and explain their past, present and future, which life history method seeks to capture (Cassell & Symon, 2004, p. 34).

Life histories allow participants to make sense of their lives and experiences using their own voice. It is based on the premise that views, truths, and conceptions of reality are best described by the individuals who experience them. However, since life histories emphasise the experiences of the participants rather than the researcher, many scholars have questioned its validity and reliability. “Critiques tend to address two issues: the representativeness of an individual life and the subjectivity of these sources” (Geiger, 1986, p. 336). The concern is that research may be tainted by the subjective views of the participants. Although this may often be the case, cognisance ought to be taken of the fact that life histories as a research style does not occur in isolation and as such, it still has the potential to provide understanding, which extends beyond the individual and into a wider context, including institutions, cultures and societies. Together with participant experiences, there is constant reference to historical and social change (Cassell & Symon, 2004) which offers a broader understanding of changes occurring within or affecting these dimensions. Although this approach emphasises the participant’s voice, there is no disregard for the role of the researcher. The researcher is responsible for adding “implicit and explicit theories to the research situation, and the task of the researcher includes surfacing these in the struggle for balance between theory in the researcher’s head and theory employed by the people in the research situation” (Cassell & Symon, 2004, p. 34).

Within this study, life histories, in the form of stories, was used to gain access to the lived experiences of the children following their parent's arrest. The aim was to understand what, if any, social changes may have been provoked by parental incarceration and how this could have affected the child in different contexts, particularly at school. These experiences were then scrutinized under theoretical and conceptual lenses to contradict, confirm, or even generate theory.

### **3.4.3 Data Collection**

Data for this research study was obtained through semi-structured interviews with pre-arranged and pre-designed questions, which allowed for the collection of rich, in-depth data. The interviews were designed to extract relevant data pertaining to the study, which according to Cohen *et al.*, (2011), is particularly useful when the researcher has an idea of what information is needed for the study. Fossey *et al.*, (2002, p. 727) explain that "qualitative research interviews aim to elicit participants' views of their lives, as portrayed in their stories, and so to gain access to their experiences, feelings and social worlds." Interpretivist research use the interview method extensively as it is an effective means for exploring the participant's perceptions and understandings of issues unique to them (Bertram *et al.*, 2010).

Since interviews allow the researcher to come into direct contact with the participant, it extends beyond a mere data collection tool to a social and inter-personal encounter. It also enables the researcher to probe, clarify, elaborate, and facilitate discussions with the participants within the parameters of guided questions (Crawford, 1997). Fossey *et al.*, (2002) add on the use of semi-structured interviews, which encourage exploration of specific research topics. Usually, these interviews are conducted using an interview guide containing a list of questions designed to steer the interview in a particular direction. The interview guide in this study contained a list of open-ended, flexible questions meant to lead the interview in a conversational manner.

The interviews were conducted on a one-on-one basis, and under the guidance of my supervisor. Interviews began with general questions and developed into more probing questions to elicit in-depth responses from the children. The purposeful inclusion of semi-structured interviews with open-ended questions hoped to encourage discussion with the participants and since the study included schoolchildren, it allowed for clarification as well. To facilitate smooth progression, I utilized several of the stages to effective interviews

suggested by Kvale (1996, p. 88). These included, introducing questions which were used to elicit a general understanding of the child's biographical information. Follow-up questions were used in instances where greater clarification of information was necessary. Probing questions allowed the participants to think more carefully about the topic under discussion. Since the study involved children, the use of specifying questions and direct questioning facilitated better understanding and directed discussions. The interview was structured in such a manner that the children were given an indication of when the theme of discussion was being changed, by breaking of long, irrelevant answers. There were deliberate pauses throughout the interview, which provided participants with an opportunity to associate and reflect on their responses. In many instances, interpreting questions were used to establish thorough understanding of respondent answers (Kvale, 1996, p. 88).

Prior to the actual interview, interviewers play a crucial role setting the tone and creating an appropriate atmosphere for the upcoming interview session. During the interview, questions should be posed in a non-assertive manner and with sensitivity to the emotions of the participants. Skilful interviewers motivate participants to discuss their inner thoughts and feelings without invading their personal privacy (Cohen *et al.*, 2011). Questions may generate non-verbal reactions such as hand gestures or facial expressions which, in some cases, may enhance the meaning of the data collected (Opdenakker, 2006). Crawford (1997) explains that despite being time-consuming, it allows for the spoken words of participants to be recorded, validated and allows for the clarification of ambiguities.

Interviews are considered particularly useful in the collection of in-depth data from a small sample and it was therefore an adequate tool for this research study. In accordance with Cohen *et al.*, (2011) each participant was briefed telephonically on the nature and purpose of the study, consent forms containing all the relevant information pertaining to the study were presented to the participants, and discussed prior to the actual interviews. Each interview lasted an hour. To ensure some privacy, the interviews were conducted on a one-on-one basis, at locations away from parents and caregivers. The interviews took place in secluded venues selected by the participant and agreed to by the caregivers. These included local parks, public libraries, and school halls (after school hours). In preparation for the interviews, the children brought along their diaries, photographs or written stories about their lives, although these were used to elicit discussion, they were not used as data in the study.

Topics included in the interview ranged from general questions about the child and their interests, demographics pertaining to child, parents and caregivers, facts related to the incarceration, subsequent changes in terms of family, social contexts, personal and scholastic performances and socio-emotional support, particularly within the context of the school. The open-ended structure of questioning allowed the children to introduce other subjects, which were of importance to them. Although this meant that stories varied, data was evident in general themes, which permeated all the stories.

To avoid rehashing the interview, a digital tape-recorder was used and the whole interview was recorded. The device was tested before use to ensure that it was in good working order. Upon completion of the interviews, the digital recordings were transcribed into textual data for easier reference. My supervisor read the transcripts and listened to the recordings to ensure accuracy and consistency. Thereafter the transcripts were analysed for themes.

The use of interviews has been criticised for the Hawthorne Effect (Cook, 1962) where it is felt that participants may be reluctant to divulge the truth or feel persuaded to say certain things to please the interviewer. To control this, the participants were assured they were not being criticised or ostracised in any way. The children were encouraged to be honest and truthful in their responses, they were given assurance of anonymity at the outset of the study. Every endeavour was made to create a relaxed atmosphere where the children would feel comfortable and free to speak openly, aware that their stories were listened to attentively and would be treated with the utmost respect.

Triangulation is achieved when multiple data collection instruments are used to produce similar, consistent data (Patton, 2002). This combination of multiple approaches strengthens the study. In this study, triangulation was achieved with the inclusion of life stories, which were written by the learners prior to the interview. Although much of what was said during the interview was similar to their written stories, it did afford the participants a chance to explicate their feelings, without persuasion, prior to meeting with and conversing with the interviewer. All that was necessary during the interview was for them to explicate their experiences verbally.

#### **3.4.4 The interview sessions**

Telephonically, the four participants were given pre-arranged dates and times for the interview. I met with each participant, some at their homes and others at neutral places of their preference. Preceding the interview was a personal introduction, welcome and a detailed explanation of the purpose and intentions of the study. I explained the anonymity and confidentiality clauses in a clear and understandable manner, whilst making clear that they had the right and option to withdraw from the study at any time and without consequence. I confirmed that consent from all the relevant gatekeepers had been obtained prior to the interview. The participants were informed that the interviews would be digitally recorded so they would have to speak audibly at all times. I advised the participants to speak openly, without feeling intimidated by my presence, and to ask for repetition or clarification at any time, should they not understand. The interviews transpired as friendly conversations rather than rigid interviews. The interview concluded with a light snack and a general conversation about other matters of interest to the children, this was not digitally recorded or used as data in the study; it was merely an opportunity for me to get to know the participants better.

#### **3.5 Validity, reliability and trustworthiness**

‘Validity’ in general, refers to something that is sound or justifiable. In research, validity strives to ascertain the accuracy and credibility of the research study (Bertram *et al.*, 2010; Cohen *et al.*, 2011). Whilst it is one of the most critical aspects of research, it remains one of the most difficult areas to address. A focal point of qualitative research seeks to understand phenomena through the eyes of the participant (Trochim, 2006). To achieve this, data must accurately reflect the realities of the participant through their own eyes. In this study, validity was firstly accomplished by allowing the voices of the participants to be heard over and above all else. The researchers had to be a good listener to allow a wealth of data to flow from the participants. A central aspect of validity in life histories is achieved through the clarification of basic assumptions and theoretical frameworks outlined by the researcher.

Construct validity refers to the congruence between the researcher’s understanding of construct and the generally accepted meaning of construct (Bertram *et al.*, 2010). In this study, construct validity was attained by aligning research explanations with the meanings with which participants constructed their realities and accomplished routine activities (Cassell



& Symon, 2004). Clear explication of key concepts eradicated misinterpretations and ensured uniformity of understanding between researcher and participant.

Data is further validated by the participants themselves when they are given the opportunity to peruse through, reflect on, and verify the data once transcribed. This ensures that the study encompasses the views of the participant and is an essential component of research validity. Lacey and Luff (2001) define this as respondent validity. In this study, the interview transcripts were returned to the participants, affording them the opportunity to verify that all the correct information had been transcribed. Respondent validation is often used in qualitative research and is considered a benchmark for quality research (Lacey & Luff, 2001).

In addition, validity is achieved in the recognition and minimisation of potential biases that sometimes influence the researcher's line of thinking. I had to acknowledge that the participant responses would to some extent, be impinged by my position as the interviewer. Therefore, in order to eliminate this possibility, I tried to downplay my role as the interviewer, so that the children would not feel a distinction in roles.

Finally, all interviews were recorded for validity purposes. Validity is achieved when all conclusions drawn by the researcher is substantiated by data (Bertram *et al.*, 2010). This back-up data was contained in digital recordings, which were also made accessible to the participants.

Reliability exists when the same or similar results can be replicated in other research contexts (Cohen *et al.*, 2011). For qualitative researchers this can present quite a challenge because participant responses and data are contextually determined and influenced by such factors as time, circumstances, and emotions. However, the issue of reliability can to some extent, be achieved through the administration of unchanged questions and by recording and coding data (Cohen *et al.*, 2011).

Trustworthiness in research is a complex combination of four criteria namely, "credibility, transferability, dependability and conformity" (Kannapathi, 2012, p. 71). Trustworthiness explores the extent to which research effectively reflects the lived experiences and realities of its participants. During data collection, trustworthiness was achieved in digital recordings, which were then transcribed into textual data. In addition, potential biases or influences on research were acknowledged.

### 3.6 Data Analysis

Fossey *et al.*, (2002, p. 728) explain that data analysis in “qualitative research is a process of reviewing, synthesising and interpreting data to describe and explain the phenomena or social worlds being studied.” Thus, the combination of organising, analysing, and interpreting data is termed, “data analysis” (McMillan & Schumacher, 1993, p. 486). Bertram *et al.*, (2010) illustrate two broad methods of reasoning in data analysis; these are called the inductive and deductive approaches. She explains that inductive reasoning involves a development from specific observations into broader generalisations and theories. Analysts begin by searching for patterns and irregularities in the raw data and use this to formulate hypotheses and eventually develop general conclusions and theories. Deductive reasoning, on the other hand, is the convergence of general theories into specific categories, which then allows the researcher to identify patterns and possible connections. A key difference is that in inductive reasoning, categories emerge from the data whereas in deductive reasoning, categories which have already been established are later linked with the data (Bertram *et al.*, 2010). Some social research, this study included, will display evidence of inductive and deductive reasoning.

Miles and Huberman (1994, p. 10) define data analysis as consisting of three concurrent and interlinked streams of activity: data reduction, data display and conclusion drawing and display. Data reduction means “selecting, focusing, simplifying, abstracting and transforming data that appear in written-up field notes or transcriptions” (Bertram *et al.*, 2010, p. 118, Kanapathi, 2012). As part of data analysis, it also involves organising and sorting data into categories, which can then be examined for patterns or relationships. Bertam (2010, p. 118) refers to data display as “an organised, compressed display of information that permits the researcher to draw conclusions and take actions”. Qualitative data display is usually presented as extended text. Well-organised assemblies of information allow for better data analysis. The final stream of data analysis is conclusion drawing which involves careful exploration for patterns and possible explanations of findings (Bertram *et al.*, 2010). Conclusions are constructed on the data gathered. However, these conclusions can only be finalised once the analysis is complete. Therefore, this aspect of data analysis will only be found at the end of this paper.

In this study, the principal element of data analysis depended on initial data capturing. During interviews, participant responses were digitally recorded. These were later transcribed



verbatim, including grammatical errors, non-verbal cues, and expressions. Accuracy during this process was a critical component of data analysis. Qualitative researchers, Lacey and Luff (2001), emphasise the importance of proper transcription, they highlight the necessity of transcribing data verbatim and the inclusion of non-verbal gestures such as hesitation or silence. These are considered important elements of conversation, which add depth to participant responses. Once completed, the transcripts were given back to the participants so they could verify and authenticate the data.

### ***Reduction and data display***

Since the data obtained for this study was voluminous, reduction of data became an important part of the data analysis stage. The initial stage of reduction involved reading and re-reading of data to get a general sense of what it entailed. Whilst reading, emerging ideas were noted. I then focused on unique themes of meaning within the data, as well as unique themes of meaning across data. In accordance with Fossey *et al.*, (2002, p. 728), I followed two levels of analysis at this stage: “first, to review, identify and code recurrent themes within the data for each participant; and second, using similar steps, to identify common themes and areas of divergence across participants.” All the topics emerging from the different sets of data were listed to detect and purge duplication.

The various topics were abbreviated to a colour code for identification and classification purposes. Coding, according to Rice and Ezzy (1999, as cited in Fossey *et al.*, 2002) involves the labelling of sections of data to identify procedures or themes. Computers served well in effectively sorting and storage of coded information. I used the computer extensively during this stage as it enabled me to point out and group similar data for the examination of patterns, connections, or dissimilarities. This allowed for links between the participants’ situations, experiences, beliefs, actions and thought process to be better understood. Although the computer does not replace conceptual understanding of the human mind, it served well in exploring the data. Effective coding also involves conceptual understanding in the development of meaning, patterns, or connections, much of which also reflects the ideologies and intuition of the researcher. Then, as Fossey *et al.*, (2002) suggest, I brought the identified themes back together into meaningful relation with each other, developing a narrative synthesis of the core elements of the experiences described. Eventually, these elements could also be linked to the broader context and with established data in existing studies.

Transcription, reduction and constant engagement with the data allowed for a great deal of familiarisation of data. Lacey and Luff (2001) consider familiarisation to be a critical aspect of data analysis. Following familiarisation is the process of coding. As mentioned earlier, the data was coded and what emerged were themes and patterns. So coding simply organises data into segments which helps bring meaning to the data.

### **3.7 Ethical considerations**

The University of KwaZulu-Natal (UKZN) requires that all non-biomedical research involving human subjects obtain ethical clearance from the Humanities and Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee. Research at UKZN is enshrined within a research policy, providing an ethical framework, which guides students in their engagement with research. This is based on the premise that sound research is governed by a set of ethical principles, considerations that are particularly important in research concerning people. Orb, Eisenhauer and Wynaden (2001), explain that a prerequisite for research involving people is a keen awareness of ethical issues. The Social Research Association elaborates that, “if research is to remain of benefit to society and the groups and individuals within it, then social researchers must conduct their work responsibly and in light of the moral and legal order of the society in which they practice”. Qualitative research explores the lived experiences of participants but this can be easily swayed by the power dynamics that exist between the researcher and the researched. Therefore, participant involvement depends on the freedom and willingness of participants to share their experiences.

Key ethical considerations are autonomy, non-maleficence and beneficence (Bertram *et al.*, 2010). To achieve this end, the following ethical aspects must be adhered to (Cohen *et al.*, 2011).

- Autonomy is obtained through voluntary, consensual participation in the study.
- Participants should have the freedom to withdraw their participation at any time and without consequence.
- The research should do no harm to the participants or others.
- The study should be of benefit to the participants or in the broader social context.
- Confidentiality and anonymity of participants cannot be breeched.

With this in mind, the following considerations ensured ethical awareness in my study:

- A written request was submitted to the Ethics Committee at the University of KwaZulu-Natal for approval and permission to proceed with the study.
- Parents, legal guardians, and caregivers were approached with the purpose, intent, and details of the study and for their permission to include their children in the research project. Their verbal consent was then corroborated on signed consent forms, which then allowed me to obtain consent from the actual participants, the children.
- The children's voluntary participation depended on their understanding of what the study entailed and what was expected of them, therefore a detailed explanation carried out before their written consent was obtained.
- All participants and gatekeepers were informed of the purpose of the study and of their individual roles within the study.
- I obtained consent from the school principals and Department of Education to conduct research with learners at the respective schools.
- I ensured that all participants were aware of my aims as the researcher.
- The participants were informed that their participation was voluntary, had to be consensual and that they were free to withdraw at any time without consequence.
- I clarified questions as and when necessary and asked the children to inform me as soon as they felt uncomfortable or intimidated during questioning.
- The children were encouraged to answer without obligation or fear of intimidation or judgement.
- Participants were assured of the confidentiality of the information they provided, although the information will be published to the public, their identity will remain protected by means of pseudonyms.

### **3.8 Limitations of the study**

While this study has many strengths, certain limitations suggest avenues for future research endeavours.

Firstly, the sample size was reduced after one participant withdrew due to personal problems. Although his participation could not have made too much of a difference, his input could have offered an interesting new perspective to the study, as each individual participant did. Since he had withdrawn his participation rather late, going through all the procedures to find

a new participant could not be done in time, so I opted to continue with one less participant. Consequently, the sample size was relatively small, with only four participants and as a result, I could not draw firm conclusions on the effects of parental incarceration on academic performance. Future research might benefit from examining a slightly larger sample, where concise conclusions could be drawn on the aspect of educational performance.

Secondly, though the children were quite open about their experiences, trustworthiness of the information given by the children relied on their honesty. The possibility that participant responses may have been influenced by other factors such as the position of the researcher cannot be excluded. Teachers' reports may have added a more insightful and professional stance on the effects the incarceration on the child's performance. However, many families did not want to alert the teachers to the incarceration and in respect of their wishes, this was not considered for this study. Perhaps future research could include the perspective of other role-players such as teachers, parents, caregivers and principals who could add depth and variation to the study.

Thirdly, this study focused on the child's academic performance during a parent's arrest. This was a relatively short-term study, which did not look into changes in academic performance over a long period. Nevertheless, I was able to gather a wealth of information regarding the impact of parental incarceration within specific contexts. It would however, have been interesting to ascertain these changes over a prolonged period: including dates prior to, during, and following a parent's arrest; this may be better achieved through more longitudinal research studies.

Lastly, only one participant had a father who was prison, the rest were mothers, so the views expressed are associated more with the experiences of children with incarcerated mothers rather than fathers. In addition, only one participant was female, the rest were male, therefore the experiences noted here might also be influenced by the gender of the participants, although any possible differences were not apparent in the study itself. In addition, the sample consisted only of black children, living in largely rural areas. In future, broader samples including a range of genders, races and social classes could offer more depth to research.

Though there were several challenges to this study, what it does accomplish is to offer a rare, in-depth look into the thoughts and perceptions of some children with a parent in prison, valuable insight that can suggest some meaningful avenues for future research.

### **3.9 Conclusion**

This chapter presented the research design, methodology, data collection tools and instrumentation used to determine the impact of parental incarceration on a child's scholastic performance. Matters concerning ethics, validity, reliability, and trustworthiness were also explored. The chapter surmised the process of data analysis, which included coding and thematic components. I delved into the limitations of the study whilst proposing suggestions for future research. The chapter to follow includes an analysis of data obtained during the semi-structured interviews and in accordance with the three research questions outlined at the outset of this study.

## **CHAPTER FOUR**

### **DATA PRESENTATION AND ANALYSIS**

#### **4.1. Introduction**

This research study was an investigation into the effect of parental incarceration on the general well-being of children with particular focus on academic performance. To determine this end, this study gathered insight into the behavioural, emotional, social, psychological, and academic experiences of children affected by parental incarceration within the context of the school, but without disregard for co-existing external factors, which may have also influenced academic performance.

The aim of this chapter is to communicate the results of the study and analyse data that correlates with the following research questions:

1. What are the schooling experiences of children who have a parent/s in prison?
2. How do these experiences affect academic performance?
3. What can schools do to satisfy the needs of learners with parents in prison?

#### **4.2 Thematic analysis**

To ensure clarity, the data collected from the interviews will be presented within themes, which although connected, have been separated according to the three research questions outlined above. In this chapter, these themes are discussed in detail using individual, verbatim responses from the children.

The themes are:

- Schooling experiences,
- Effect on academic performance,
- School-based support.

### 4.3 Presentation of data and analysis

#### 4.3.1 Schooling experiences

##### *Separation from a parent*

Separation from a parent, under any circumstance, is bound to effect the emotions of a child. Parent-child separation due to incarceration is likely to evoke a range of emotions analogous to death or divorce (Johnson, 2007) but since this is a unique experience in itself, other individual experiences may surface as well. Like other forms of parent-child separation, it is quite possible that these emotions may surface and have some impact on their schooling. The participants in this study acknowledge that during a routine school day, they felt a range of emotions linked to their parent's incarceration. When asked how the separation from his parent made him feel when he was at school, Participant 3 explained that although his mum's imprisonment had severely affected him, he found comfort in detaching himself emotionally, thus:

*"I can't really explain the way it makes me feel cause all the time, I don't really want to think about it because it gets me emotional. So then, that's why I tend uh to have a smile on my face all the time, to try and block all the other anger and the sadness" (Participant 3).*

When at school, detachment was a mechanism used for dealing with the situation, and he did come across as a very happy child when he spoke of anything but his mother's imprisonment. This is consistent with Geller *et al.*, (2009) who speak of children and their feelings regarding the imprisonment. Further interviews, in contrast, revealed that other children also externalise their emotions regarding imprisonment (Geller *et al.*, 2009). Not all children were able to suppress their feelings. Participant 1 recounted how she had initially struggled with the thought of her mum being in prison but over time had learned to accept it.

*"I was very upset about it at first, um but I've grown over the past two years to hmm adapt with the change of her being away from home" (Participant 1).*

For Participant 2, although his mum had only been gone for a short while, the effects of that separation on his school day were still apparent. Research into parental incarceration has shown that separation, especially mothers who are usually primary caregivers, can



significantly affect the child's emotions. According to Johnson (1991, cited in Parke & Clarke-Steward, 2002) children who witness a mother's arrest may suffer nightmares and flashbacks to the traumatic incident and this could also lead to concentration problems at school and serious mental health issues later on in life. In other instances, children may return from school to an empty home unaware of their parent's arrest, resulting in feelings of abandonment and rejection. Participant 2 speaks candidly about the imprisonment of his mother:

*"Well, it's quite hard on me cause my mum was everything to me, and well, basically, she helped me with everything with school and stuff, and with everything she was behind me all the way and it's not the same with my dad, we don't have any connection or anything like that"* (Participant 2).

As with any other form of separation, children would feel some sense of loss in their lives. Participant 3 simply described his mum's absence in this way:

*"...it's not a very pleasant feeling...it's like there's something short when she's not around..."* (Participant 3).

This correlates with Boss' (1999, 2004, 2006) theory of ambiguous loss, the feeling of knowing a family member is alive but physically unavailable. Participant 1 described her feelings in this regard:

*"It's very, very hard, hmm cause I'm growing up in an environment with friends and um my neighbourhood friends and at school um where they, where they have their mums living with them and hmm I feel very isolated... at first I used to feel a bit deprived um of a normal childhood...from time to time I would cry about it"* (Participant 1).

Her emotions resulting from the separation had also been aggravated by the lack of interaction with her mum since the arrest. This confirms Johnson and Easterling (2012) belief that the lack of social support and information about the parent can aggravate the distress the child may be feeling.

Although in the instances mentioned above, the gender of the incarcerated parent was female, the reactions from the children were quite different. This is in contrast to research presented by Fritsch & Burkhead (1981, cited in Johnson, 2007, p. 6) which associated the imprisonment of a mother with “acting in” behaviour, or internalising feelings, and the absence of a father with “acting out” behaviour. At the same time, it must be acknowledged that the impact of a mother versus father arrest is largely unknown and needs greater attention in future research.

Since such a variety of emotions emerged from the separation itself, it was important to consider how often the children interacted with their parents whilst in prison. In his state of the nation address, Former U.S. President George W. Bush described these children as “boys and girls trying to grow up without guidance and attention, and children who have to go through a prison to be hugged by their mum or dad” (Vacca, 2008, p. 50). Although the research shows that it could be linked to negative social, emotional, psychological and academic outcomes, there is no concrete way to attest whether it is the incarceration itself or post incarceration risk factors, which trigger problematic behaviours.

The anxiety the children felt when at school could be reduced when contact between parent and child is sustained even during the prison term. For three participants, contact with their parent averaged around twice a month with more frequent visits during school holidays. However, since her imprisonment two years ago, Participant 1 has only seen her mother once at prison. While this made her feel deprived, other children who did get to see their parents looked forward to the visits and felt connected with their parents. Seymour (1998) believes that nearly half of all prisoners in correctional facilities receive no or infrequent visitations from their children. While there may be many plausible reasons for such irregularities, it could still have a serious impact on the child who longs for contact with their parents. Attachment theorist, Bowlby (1982) believes that once attachments with parents have been formed, any kind of separation thereafter can trigger a range of emotions within the child. Thus, the establishment of on-going contact during incarceration may be essential to maintaining that sense of attachment between parent and child (Poehlmann *et al.*, 2002). Nevertheless, there are instances where children can develop negative attachments to parents and where forced separation may actually be necessary for the child, but since all the children already had positive attachments with their parents, that theory could not be confirmed in this study.

Three participants in this study see their parent on a regular basis. For these children, the topics discussed during visits were general. The atmosphere at the prison, according to Participant 4, was a bit “*scary*”, but it somehow compensated for their absence at home and allowed the parent and child to bond with each other. When asked what the topics of discussion during visits were, it usually involved their home and school life, Participant 2 said:

*“...with me it’s school, she’s forever pushing me”* (Participant 2).

It was evident that even behind the confines of prison walls, the parents still tried to motivate and encourage their children at school and this was what motivated him to always achieve at his best at school.

Parental incarceration may cause children to become depressed, anxious and there have been cases of “post traumatic stress syndrome analogous to children whose parents have died,” (Breen, 1995, cited in Miller, 2006, p. 478). There are a number of other studies, which also associate depressive symptoms with parental incarceration (Kampfner, 1995; Wilbur, Marani, Appugliese, Woods, Siegel Cabral & Frank, 2007) and it is highly likely that these depressive symptoms could manifest or affect the child at school. Recent studies have uncovered more specific problems which can be linked to trauma due to separation from a parent, reduced contact with parents, changes in living arrangements, socioeconomic deprivation, genetic predispositions all of which can have a significant bearing on the child’s functioning at school. These will be discussed in sections to follow.

### ***Financial Hardship***

If the parent had been previously employed, their imprisonment would mean a discontinuation of their finances. This loss of income could restrict the remaining parent, enforce limitations in terms of provisions both at home and for school, and even cause disruptions to the child’s way of life (Parke & Clarke-Steward, 2002). In extreme cases, financial pressures could force families to move homes, schools and even limit resources available for the child.

Those children living in the same home but under guardianship have noticed changes in the dynamics of the home since the arrest. Now living with a guardian aunt, Participant 1 says:

*"It's very different now... I can't be as open with my guardian as I was with my mother... a lot of times I need support with a lot of things especially school wise and I don't get that as much as I used to when my mum was still around"* (Participant 1).

She then goes on to explain how the imprisonment has taken a financial toll on the family:

*"There is less source of income during the month. Um, my dad gives us, funds us a little bit um for transport-wise go-going to school whereas when my mother was around I used to go to school with her and um we always used to know that she would be the one to take care of everything in the, um, within the household, and now when we are, when we are struggling at times hmm we don't have that person to rely on because my dad is very far and um he gives us that allowance during the month but then it doesn't cover everything... Um I have to wait for a certain p-urh-period of time before getting something that I need or I will end up not getting it at all so that also adds to the feeling of isolation and ya, not fitting in with my friends and uh my life not being the same anymore"* (Participant 1).

The financial implications on this family is extensive as the guardian is also unemployed, they are therefore reliant on the finances provided by her father who lives with his own family in another town. Bloom (1995, cited in Miller, 2006) did point out that fathers, whether residing at home or not, would offer some kind of financial assistance. Tasca *et al.*, (2011) concur although many fathers may not reside with their children at the time of arrest; they still have relationships with their children, and contribute financially to raising their children. In the same manner, with Participant 1, the father makes a substantial financial contribution towards the guardianship of his daughter.

On the other hand, when it is the father who is arrested, like in the case of Participant 4, the challenges may be strikingly different. Following his father's arrest, Participant 4 noticed that his mother began working longer hours, he had to move residence far away from his school to a rural area, which made travelling to school a problem, and he missed the luxuries he was once privy to when his dad was home. This supports research conducted by Tasca *et al.*,

(2011) which states that fathers play a significant role in social and economic support for their children, and in their absence, this aspect of home life would be significantly impeded.

For Participants 2 and 3, it is the mother who is in prison. Participant 1 lives with his dad and therefore was not aware of any existing financial problems; but for Participant 3, who now lives with a guardian, the loss of their mother's income has been quite apparent. Bloom (1995, cited in Miller, 2006) agrees that the loss of a mother's income may have huge implications for the family. Single mothers, like that of Participant 3, often emanate from impoverished backgrounds and are usually the sole providers for their families. For Participant 3, the imprisonment of his mother has had significant consequences for the family; the children had to be separated so that relatives could help care for them. They also had to change schools from former model C to rural schools, since they could no longer afford school fee costs. Miller (2006) believes that without financial assistance from remaining parents and adequate social grants from government, these children would continue to live below the bread line.

The requirements of older learners are somewhat different to that of younger learners; they may require assistance with research projects and assignments, financial assistance and tuitions. Without their parents' support, this can be quite a challenging task for a school-going child. Participant 1 speaks of her experiences in this regard:

*"My mum used to help me, uh more with my projects uh for school, because with the day-to-day homework uh I would cope but she would uh help me a lot with the projects in terms of typing, putting them together, doing my research and ensuring that...I really do well in my projects because th-they add up to me passing well at the end of the year. And currently, I have to try and do all of that alone, um I have to try and access computers and internet cafes and stuff like that. Uh there is not one else to help me now that my mum is gone"* (Participant 1).

Since she lives in a rural village with no access to internet facilities, she explains that getting her projects done is quite an arduous task:

*"I have to save up and then go to town to be able to pay for the internet cafe"*  
(Participant 1).

On a positive note, she feels that this has prompted her to become more self-sufficient, she takes pride in the fact that she has managed to cope alone, without parents and feels quite prepared for life outside school next year.

All the children in this study emanate from the low-income bracket and disadvantaged communities. Low income is generally associated with unsafe neighbourhood, underprivileged schools and poverty (Geller *et al.*, 2009). These are areas where Western (2006) believes incarceration levels may be most prominent. The children in this study have shown that the imprisonment of their parent had only aggravated their current economic circumstances and placed them at greater risk for further disadvantage. Research confirms that the connection between depleted economic capital, stress, and ineffective parenting promotes negative outcomes for children, and impedes the ability to raise children successfully (Hagan, 1996; Grant, Compas, Stuhlmacher, Thurm, McMohan & Halpert, 2003).

### ***Residential Instability***

Tasca *et al.*, (2011) point out that change in guardianship, residence and a break down of family bonds are common outcomes of parental incarceration. Following the arrest of their mothers, Participant 1 and 3 took up residency with guardians, while Participant 2 continued living with his dad. After his father's arrest Participant 4, moved out of the suburbs and into a rural area with his mother. To some extent, this supports research studies, like that of Tasca *et al.*, (2011) which state that living arrangements following a parent's arrest depends largely on existing family structures. Children residing with both parents will usually go on residing with the remaining parent, as was the case with participants 2 and 4. Those living with single parents, like participants 1 and 3, will relocate to guardians or extended families (Parke & Clarke-Steward, 2002; Tasca *et al.*, 2011). Whatever the case may be changes, movements and relocation of this nature is likely to disrupt the child's sense of familiarity and security (Parke & Clarke-Steward, 2002). These changes can also impact other areas of the child's life, including relationships with sibling, schools, teachers, and friends.



For Participant 4, moving house meant travelling a further distance to school every day. Although he still attends the same school, he must now use public transport to reach his school. As a result, he is frequently absent from school. He feels out of place in his new home and would try to stay out as late as possible so that he would not have to spend too much time there:

*"I come home at night, I just like to sit with my friends and play games"*  
(Participant 4).

Since the home was now quite far away from school and mum worked late hours, he could stay out late without detection. This supports research which states that parental incarceration often leaves remaining caregivers over-worked and stressed out, having little time to focus on the needs of the child (Nesmith & Ruhland, 2008; Murray *et al.*, 2012). Although he now lives in a rural area, his mum has to work late hours to ensure he remains at the ex-model C school he had been attending prior to his dad's arrest.

The parents and caregivers in this study have endeavoured to maintain the schooling careers of the children at the schools they were at prior to the arrest. Since they are both at high school, Participant 1 and 2 also remained at their schools, as their parents did not want to disrupt their schooling routine following the arrest. Participant 3 however, had to move from an ex-model C primary school to a rural high school to absorb costs of the imprisonment.

In the home itself, all three participants who had mothers in prison shared similar feelings following her arrest. They described it as a missing link in the home, something that caused the home to lose its homely feeling. There are several studies, which purport maternal incarceration to be more damaging for the child (Mackintosh *et al.*, 2006; Tasca *et al.*, 2011). The children in this study tended to agree, Participant 2 described his home following the arrest of his mother:

*"Before the arrest we lived in the same place where we're living right now, it's just that it was more of a home, you know, you were happy to go home. Sometimes, it's just best staying with your friends somewhere"* (Participant 2).



He too did not look forward to going home at the end of the day as it brought back too many memories of his mum, staying out with friends helped him forget that his mum was not at home.

Imprisonment does not only mean separation from a parent, in some cases it means separation from siblings as well (Cunningham, 2001). This can only add to the sense of loss that the child feels. Participant 3 was separated from his five siblings after his mother's arrest. Some went to live with various extended families in different areas, whilst he and an older brother remained in the family home with a guardian. The rationale behind this he states is:

*"Me and my brother, yes the two of us cause we are the older ones and uh it's like if we leave the house uh people are gonna break in and take the things"*  
(Participant 3).

Therefore, it is now the children's responsibility to protect the family home until their mother's release from prison. This is a major responsibility for a 17-year-old boy but he has taken it in his stride. He feels as though he can use this as an opportunity to make his mum proud of him:

*"When my mum went to prison, she left a house, when she comes out of prison, I want her not to see a house but see something more than a house"* (Participant 3).

Nesmith and Ruhland (2008) agree that the incarceration of a parent often forces children into adult roles, for which they are usually unprepared. The children in this study noted increased responsibilities in their daily lives that range from home management to simple household chores. Participant 2 explains how, in the absence of his mum he and his younger brothers have naturally taken on responsibilities in the home:

*"Well, household chores we split them up, usually I do the cooking and the cleaning and...my brothers do the dishes and stuff like that"* (Participant 2).

Changing responsibilities also extend to school-related tasks such as homework. Homework plays a pivotal role in linking school with home. As noted above, the absence of a senior

family member can result in increased responsibilities in the home and therefore less time to focus on homework. In addition, with the remaining parent now assuming greater responsibilities, the supervision of homework is also affected (Aaron & Dallaire, 2010). Participant 3 explains that since his guardian is unable to assist with homework, he tries to help his younger brother who is in grade 4 with his homework, and when it comes to his own homework:

*“It’s really difficult because if uh, if I don’t understand, I must make sure I ask the teacher before the teacher leaves”* (Participant 3).

In addition, an older cousin attending the same school assists him. He finds this useful in that the cousin is able to explain things in a relatable manner. He is also encouraged to work with and form a study group with this cousin and his friends; he has found this helpful with homework.

Although the study group system has proven useful in some instances, it is not workable for every child. Participant 2 explained that before his mum went to prison, she had encouraged them to form study groups to do homework, but after her imprisonment, the system folded as their responsibilities at home increased.

*“Now we just do it on our own and I help my brothers out with homework and stuff like that”* (Participant 2).

It is more likely for parents to play a much more practical and informative role in homework with their younger children. Sitting down with the younger ones and instructing them as they work through their tasks is an important parental role in education. The imprisonment of a parent might mean the discontinuation of this guidance and support on the home front. Participant 4, who is still at primary school, felt the strain of doing homework by himself after his dad’s imprisonment; he explained how his dad would help him with his homework every night. Now that his dad is in prison, his mum by herself cannot cope, and he has to attempt all by himself:

*“...she doesn’t have time she also does her work”* (Participant 4).

Undertaking homework is different for different households, as seen above, homework tasks differ with age and so does the roles of parents as facilitators. These differences also extend to the number of children in each household. In homes where there is only one child, unless the child gets help from the remaining parent or guardian, they are often left to their own devices in this regard. As a result, homework may often be incorrect or incomplete. In the case of Participant 4, since his mum is unable to help him, he just stays out late and does not do his homework, whether it is not done or incorrect, he will still be punished, so why do it at all, he says. For younger children, who often depend on adult assistance, homework can be a daunting task. For single children in the higher grades, it may require much greater effort on their part especially when it comes down to project work and assignments. In other cases, in homes with several children, older siblings sometimes take on parental roles in assisting their younger brothers and sisters with homework.

Parental incarceration destabilises the living arrangements of the children involved. Parke and Clarke-Steward (2002) explain that a child's life can be disrupted by relocation and residency with alternative caregivers. Even when residency is maintained with remaining parents, added responsibilities and stressors can be discomfoting for the child. Residential instability is a serious issue for children who may have to change schools or be separated from their siblings during the process of changing homes. Tasca *et al.*, (2011) note that sudden changes in residency can inflict considerable strain on the child, resulting in alterations to routines, relationships, and academic performance. Research does show positive outcomes for living with kin (Clopton & East, 2008), but as this study depicts, kinship residence is not always possible. Regardless of where the child resides, there are a variety of studies that suggest that the creating of a safe and stimulating family environment, with positive parenting may be key to addressing child development and emotional stability during stressful times (Kjellstrand & Eddy, 2011a).

### ***Disclosing to friends***

Three of the four participants in this study stated that their schools were unaware of their parent's arrest and it was their desire to keep it that way. Despite the many changes that take place in the household following an arrest, it was striking how tight-lipped these children were about their home situation and news of their parent's imprisonment. In most cases, just one or two very close friends knew about the home situation. When asked why he had opted not to tell other friends about his dad's imprisonment, Participant 4 responded with:

*“...I’m embarrassed and scared to tell them...maybe they’ll laugh”* (Participant 4).

He fears that if his friends became aware of the imprisonment, they might ridicule him. Participant 2 shared similar sentiments, but his main concern was how his friends may judge him for it,

*“Sometimes you don’t know what people would think of you because your mother is in prison and people are judgemental and stuff like, it’s really hard to just tell them, ‘Hey my mum is in prison!’”* (Participant 2).

Both children associated disclosure with risks and as a result, they safeguarded themselves by keeping the situation a closely guarded secret. According to Participant 3, maintaining this secrecy is not too difficult to achieve, especially at school,

*“When you’re in school you don’t ask about parents, so cause it’s a different situation when you’re at home because they’ll really see that your parents are not there”* (Participant 3).

Since no one actually saw or inquired about his parents, he was able to keep his secret. Events which usually require parental involvement, such as sports days and parent interviews are not observed at these schools, therefore, if the child maintained his or her secret, no one actually noticed that his or her parent was absent from home. Participant 3 describes it in this way:

*“So at sports day where they require parents to be there, we don’t really have that at our school so it’s a lot easier for that, yes”* (Participant 3).

Perhaps their concerns are justified but could it be preventing them from receiving the support and comfort they may need? Participant 1 has experienced the latter, her friends have always known about her mum’s imprisonment and she has found them to be supportive throughout the whole process. She believes that if not for her friends she might not have coped through the ordeal of a court case, arrest, and eventual imprisonment. Children may

have several justifiable reasons for withholding information about their parents, but what makes the odd child open up about these things is of interest.

For Participant 1, having her friends rally around her in support was invaluable. Her situation was compared to that of the three boys who had opted not to tell any of their friends. She attends an all-girls school and is in her grade 12 year. Her mum was arrested several years back so it is now something that all her friends know well and have come to accept as part of her life. Perhaps because she is in an all girl's school, it could be easier to talk about personal issues. Is it because girls tend to share more of their emotions with their friends than boys do? Alternatively, was she given the opportunity, when the boys were not? Whatever the reasons may be, both systems seems to have worked well for the children involved and none of them, boy or girl, hinted that they would like to change their current situation to involve or not involve their friends.

This is not to say that the boys in this study did not tell any of their friends, just that it was not plain knowledge to everyone within their circle. Participant 2 has only ever told one close female friend about his mum and though she is no longer at school with him, he still confides in her, he says:

*"Well that friend of mine has been there from the get go and I trust her with everything and she understands and is very supportive"* (Participant 2).

For Participant 3, the two friends who do know are neighbours, so they were aware of the situation from the outset. He states that these are the only friends who do know of his mum's arrest whilst the rest of his friends at school have no clue. He explains:

*"All my friends at home know about the situation but then it's a lot difficult because my friends at school I just met them about two years ago. So it's a lot difficult coming to a person and telling them you know all your problems because it's not like they gonna do, they gonna tell you something, they just gonna say sorry and that's the only thing they can do"* (Participant 3).

Regardless of how many friends came to know, all the children agreed that the few friends who did know of it were encouraging and empathetic towards their situation. There were no

signs of teasing or marginalisation due to the incarceration. This may be because the children had carefully selected whom they wished to inform. During the interview with Participant 3, it became apparent that he preferred talking about his situation with certain friends; since they shared similar home circumstances, he felt they could better understand his situation. Both his friends did not reside with their parents and although their circumstances were different, he felt a connection with them. Of his one friend he said,

*“He doesn’t have uh what you call this, uh parents around so we kind of like in the same situation, but mine is a lot tougher... he can relate easily”* (Participant 3).

He pointed out that because his friends also had to live without their parents, they understood his situation and did not have reason to judge him.

Parental incarceration and the associated separation, domestic changes and economic instability can adversely affect child development. Children may become victims of social stigmatisation due to their parent’s criminal behaviour and as, Miller (2006) states, cultural factors may also determine the way in which children are victimized. For example, in crime-infested neighbourhoods, where criminality is the norm, social stigma is lessened. However, the child may be aware of the social stigma attached to their parent’s incarceration and therefore opt to internalise their feelings regarding their parent’s absence. This form of ‘forced silence’ could potentially increase trauma in children. According to Kampfner (1995), this may be exhibited in insomnia, concentration problems and depression. Amongst the children in this study, the only visible sign that they were actually aware of was concentration problems.

Children may feel ashamed of their parent’s actions, thinking that others may reject or judge them unfairly. Rejection from family and friends is particularly damaging for their already fragile socio-emotional state and they may withdraw from any meaningful relationships in order to protect themselves. It is not uncommon for children to blame themselves for their parent’s criminality. This is especially true when the parent had been forced to resort to crime in order to provide for the family. Miller (2006) believes that when these feelings of culpability are harboured for long periods of time and without counsel, it can have significant long-term effects on the child’s development.

### ***Disclosing to teachers***

With regard to teachers, some children expressed desires not to inform their teachers and for those who did know, it was not intentional. For the former, in response to a question on why he had not told any of his teachers about his mum's imprisonment, Participant 2 simply stated,

*"Well it's because I know what kind of teachers we have at school and I don't think there's a teacher in the school that I can have a bond with or who I can trust with such a delicate story"* (Participant 2).

He went on to say that he would not tell any of his teachers,

*"...because judging academically, they are not even helpful there"* (Participant 2).

In this case, much of what the teacher did in the classroom became an antecedent for their ability to deal with sensitive issues in a different context. He also strongly believes that trust must firstly be established between teacher and learner so that the learner feels comfortable enough to open up (Rossen, 2011).

Another child, who seems a lot more comfortable speaking about her situation, confided in two teachers at her school, although even this was not intentional. When asked why she had opted to tell those two teachers, she said,

*"Not all the teachers at my school interact with us as learners, not all of them open up to us or want us or give us the opportunity to open up to them. Um so the ones that I have told are usually are basically the ones that I'm more close with and um I feel more open to open up... I was more comfortable talking to them about it than I would have been with the other teachers"* (Participant 1).

Participant 4 also had two teachers who became aware of his dad's imprisonment after his mother had been called to school regarding his behaviour and performance. He emphasised that it was not his decision to tell his teachers, but his mum had done so to alert his teachers



as to possible reasons for his poor performance at school. When asked why he had not chosen to tell them himself, he simply stated,

*"I'm...scared to tell them, only my mum told the others because I had a problem"*

(Participant 4).

He feared the possibility that he might be ridiculed because of what his father had done.

Evidently, the children in this particular study preferred not to inform their teachers of their parent's incarceration. This raised questions concerning the role of teachers in easing a child through experiences such as this and whether or not telling them should be as daunting as they assume it to be. Although these children do agree that teachers are in a position to help and provide support, they admit that they have never felt a personal desire to inform their teachers.

It was also interesting to see how many teachers did not even suspect that such drastic changes had taken place within the child's life, partly because they were not informed but also because they had not taken the time to find out. How the few teachers became aware of the home situation was also interesting. Participant 1 described the events that led her to reveal her mum's imprisonment to her teachers:

*"It wasn't really uh an intention for me to tell them or I could say I didn't really tell them on purpose but it also wasn't a mistake as such. The one teacher I told her because I'd spoken about it, mentioned it in my oral during my English and the other teacher she used to find me crying from time to time, um so uh I would have to leave her lessons, and ya for other various reasons but ya that's how it came about that I ended up opening up to them about it. Because it had been bothering me and I also wanted to talk about it"* (Participant 1).

When a child decides to open up to a teacher, be it intentional or not, the manner in which the teacher responds becomes pivotal to how the child adjusts to his or her new situation. Sometimes concern can be more detrimental than good if it is expressed incorrectly. Participant 3 recalls his teachers' reactions when they realised his mother was in prison.

*“In primary school... every teacher when it was their period, they used to come, ‘Are you okay?’ Things like that. So it really puts you under the spotlight”*  
(Participant 3).

He felt as though all the teachers did was show pity towards him, which made other learners think something was wrong with him and made him feel extremely uncomfortable. He explained that their show of “pity” towards him was not necessary and he would have preferred them treating him the same as everyone else, as a result, he had decided not to tell his high school teachers about the imprisonment for fear that they might also react in the same way. He describes how, now that he is in high school, he would wear a happy face and involve himself in the classroom, so as not to draw attention to his home situation. Due to his primary school experiences, he just did not want his teachers finding out about the imprisonment. This made him feel more comfortable at school and did not make him feel like he was different from other learners. Although pity is not necessarily a bad reaction to parental incarceration, children may want someone to empathise with their situation but not to the extent, that it becomes common knowledge to everyone and where attention is drawn to their situation.

On a more positive note, there are learners who experienced positive outcomes from disclosing their situations to their teachers. Participant 4 said this of his teachers after they were told about his dad’s imprisonment,

*“They helped me...with my work...Then at break time I used to do my work and finish up my work”* (Participant 4).

Participant 1 expressed similar experiences with her teachers,

*“Um the first teacher that um I actually told, um she felt very sorry for me, um she was actually crying for me and she said that I could actually come to her whenever I need any kind of support or um whenever I need someone to talk to and that uh I mustn’t feel uh I mustn’t feel abandoned or isolate myself as I say I’d been feeling... that I shouldn’t blame myself in any kind of way um and that I must know that my mum still loves me and that I m-my love for my mum mustn’t grow any less um because of the conviction and any crimes that she might have*

*been doing... My other teacher, my Business Studies teacher... she supports me from time to time, she um, she gives me talks every now and then and she understands and she also says that I can come to her and help with my schoolwork or help with anything else that I feel I might be struggling with” (Participant 1).*

Although these teachers also showed concern for the child, it was where and how it was expressed which distinguished them from the others. This is in line with Kjellstrand and Eddy (2011a, p. 18) who state that “praise, positive motivational strategies, synchrony and the absence of coercive control were associated with fewer child externalising behaviours.” The stigma attached to imprisonment is the usual reason why most children refrain from telling their teachers and this, according to Murray *et al.*, (2012) prevents them from receiving the help and support they so desperately need. In this study, it was apparent that the children appreciated the concern and support given by their teachers but only when done without victimisation.

### ***Heightened sensitivity to topic***

In the classroom subject matter and content sometimes draws attention to sensitive issues, which unbeknown to the teacher and many learners, may actually be affecting learners. Content sometimes stirs up class discussions, which involve violence, criminality, and imprisonment; for teachers turning attention away from issues like this is not always easy. One would assume that most learners would look at their parent’s incarceration in a negative light and a disadvantage, but when asked how he responds to sensitive discussions concerning crime and imprisonment in the classroom, Participant 3 had a rather interesting response:

*“Okay, if you talking about that, it’s like in that part of the subject, that means I’m gonna get something like an A+ because I know most of the things about that because I’ve got like experience cause I’m also involved with the, I’m also involved with being a child of someone of someone who’s in prison” (Participant 3).*

He saw the positive side of his situation, using it to his advantage rather than seeing it in a negative light but this is not always the case; when posed with the same scenario, Participant 1 had a remarkably different response:

*“I usually don’t like to participate in anything that links up to avoid a situation for me. Um I usually excuse myself or um rather just uh tell my teacher that I would rather not participate. It usually happens in LO lessons and English lessons so I wouldn’t say that it uh, cause it triggers a lot of things for me so uh I wouldn’t be targeted because I’m not usually there for that or um the teacher usually tries and be more sincere about it and more sensitive about how to go about discussing the topics anything like that”* (Participant 1).

When teachers are aware of a learner’s home situation, sensitivity on their part is expected, however, in many cases, teachers are uninformed and how they deal with such discussions is rather important. Participant 3 explained why many teachers might not be able to deal with such issues effectively:

*“They don’t realise because they really don’t know that there’s a student there that’s being affected by the same thing, but then on the other side it’s not really their fault because ... we not the same uh and the teachers don’t understand that why this person had to murder or do something like that”* (Participant 3).

Detecting that a child has a parent in prison is not a simple matter. In these instances, Participant 3 empathises with the teachers, stating that they cannot always ensure sensitivity, especially in cases where they are unaware.

### ***Changes in behaviour***

Any experience involving drastic familial change is likely to impact on a child’s behaviour, so behavioural changes following a parent’s arrest, is almost inevitable. All the children in this study acknowledged changes in their behaviour after the arrest, while some became passive, others became aggressive, and although they could not pin it directly to the arrest, they do concede that the arrest had influenced their behaviour in some way. Participant 2 felt that the imprisonment might have had the following affect on him:

*"Towards behaviour...sometimes I do snap for no reason and I get angry... I wouldn't really blame that [the arrest], but then sometimes it does" (Participant 2).*

Participant 4 admitted that his behaviour had taken a turn for the worse after his father, who used to maintain discipline in the home, was arrested,

*"I used to behave when he [my dad] was here" (Participant 4).*

Since his dad was in the police force, he had a firm hand on discipline; the child therefore feared the repercussions of bad behaviour and was always well behaved. Following the arrest, his behaviour took a turn for the worse. This is consistent with Tasca *et al.*, (2011) who note that boys who had fathers in prison would display heightened levels of aggressive behaviour. When asked why he felt that he could not behave anymore, he simply said,

*"Because there's like, other learners... have their own fathers and I don't have mine" (Participant 4).*

He attributes his own bad behaviour directly to his father's absence. Although his mother tries to enforce discipline in the home, he explains that he does not find her to be as forceful as his dad. This confirms research which states that the gender of the incarcerated parent might influence behavioural changes in their children (Johnson, 2007). For instance, as in this case, the father generally assumes a disciplinary role in the home and following his arrest, the child acts out because his firm hand over discipline is no longer enforced.

It is also possible that the age of the child will influence their behavioural changes as well. Younger children may not know how to deal with their emotions and may therefore act out following the arrest. Participant 3 explains it in this way, at first, when he was much 'younger,' the arrest had severely affected his behaviour. He said,

*"When I first heard about the arrest, so in primary school I had a lot of fights but now I just adapted to the situation" (Participant 3).*

He admitted that his behaviour had only improved with understanding and maturity. This, however, is in contrast to Hagan's (1996) notion that children's maladaptive behaviours would become more erratic as they reach adolescence.

Gender may also evoke varying behavioural changes in children (Hagan, 1996). This became quite apparent in this study where the boys admitted to acting out behaviours at some point following the arrest, while female Participant 1 displayed more acting in behaviours. She explained:

*"So, uh behaviour-wise, I can say that I've become more subtle or quiet, but um I still talk um and I still try and uh be a normal child especially around my friends but um I'm not as normal as I used to be. And uh some, some people do notice that um there is a difference about me um but I uh I-I try not to be exposive about it like by actually supporting the fact that everything has changed and me, myself just being different, notice-noticeably different"* (Participant 1).

In this case, she is well aware that she has changed, she admits to being less communicative now but in comparison to the boys, she appeared to display the least behavioural problems and was less inclined to act out at school.

Research shows that children experiencing psychological problems manifest their emotions through "maladaptive or contumacious behaviours such as withdrawing emotionally in school, truancy, pregnancy, drug abuse, diminished academic performance and disruptive behaviour" (Miller, 2006, p. 478). They may resort to social cliques that could negatively affect their behaviour.

Parental incarceration has been associated with higher rates of maladjustive behaviours (Aaron & Dallaire, 2010) often resulting in school dropouts. This was most apparent in the youngest participant in this study. He acknowledged his poor behaviour following his father's imprisonment and actually attributed it to the incarceration. His results dropped, he repeated a grade and his family has now taken the decision to remove him from school and send him to a place of safety for boys.

Parental incarceration may lead to gang involvement and delinquent behaviour where they are likely to face juvenile detention. McQuiade and Ehrenreich (1998) believe that the children of today are at risk of inter-generational incarceration. A recent study by Johnson (2007) concurs that the children of inmates have a pre-disposition to inter-generational imprisonment. According to Mumola (2000) nearly half of the youth in juvenile detention have or have had a parent imprisoned.

### ***Co-curricular and extra-curricular participation***

The children expressed a lack of motivation even in extra-curricular and co-curricular activities. Some pointed out that following the arrest they found that they no longer had the desire to participate in these activities. Participant 2 felt that even though he loves his sports, he was forced to give them up after his mother's arrest:

*"Well it has changed since mum has gone cause uh I really don't get the time, you know, to participate in sport or anything. I don't have time at all"*  
(Participant 2).

Since her mother was no longer around to offer motivation and support, Participant 1 felt no desire to continue with sport following her arrest:

*"I think it's mainly because of the support that I used to get from my mum when I used to partake in those activities. Like I remember it was the first thing that she advised me to do when I got, when I got in high school in grade 8, that I should actually do something almost every day of the week and um actually be active in school and everything and I used to do that because I am a very interactive person um and I actually love doing things all the time, so you find that I was uh doing choir and tennis and netball and all sorts of other... things. But then when my mother left, uh I left all those extra-curricular activities, they just didn't seem the same anymore, for some reason, and I also didn't feel like being involved in them anymore"* (Participant 1).

Shying away from sport is not always the case though, in some instances it may become a useful outlet for children. Participant 4 uses sport as his escape from the realities at home. He enjoys being with his friends and playing sport at school. He is an excellent athlete and



participates in most sporting codes at his school. Since his mother works late and he travels home by public transport he is able to stay on late at school and play sport whenever he pleases. However, for him sport takes precedence over all other school activities. As a result, his homework and academics suffer.

#### **4.3.2 Effects on academic performance**

Since so many areas of a child's life are impacted by parental incarceration, it would be naive to assume that this would have no bearing on their academic performance. Research proves that children who have parents in prison may be at risk for negative academic outcomes by virtue of the many problems they already experience (Hanlon, Blatchley, Bennet-Sears, O'Grady, Rose & Callaman, 2005). In several instances, this was apparent to the children themselves who noticed changes in the academic performance following their parent's arrest. Some were able to make a direct connection between the incarceration and deterioration in their results. In response to a question on whether the incarceration had affected his academic performance, Participant 2 said:

*"Yes it has cause, you know, what happens at home reflects on how you are towards everything you do whether it's academic or, you know, it's when you with other people but then it reflects, you know it shows when there's something missing"* (Participant 2).

He strongly believes that events taking place at home have a way of infiltrating into schooling as well. Participant 3 noticed a significant drop in his results over time.

*"When I was at primary school I was like an A+ student so ya, now in high school its a lot difficult uh different because it's like if you had to compare, uh the rate has really dropped. I uh study but it's not the same"* (Participant 3).

Although there may be many contributing factors causing his academic decline, such as change of school, from primary to high school, and tougher syllabi, he still believes the drop in his marks is a direct result of the imprisonment.

Participant 4 blames his father's imprisonment for his two failures at school. He, like the others, acknowledges that their academic performance has suffered because of the imprisonment. Participant 1 explains that without her mum in the supportive and motivating role, she struggles to cope at school:

*"Academically, um it hasn't, it hasn't been the same, a lot of my subjects have dropped. Um I think that maybe because with my mum around, she used to make an effort to always get me extra lessons and always used to guide me. She was sort of like almost like my study guide uh when she was around um and uh she used to support me very much uh school wise. Everything concerning school she was very concerned about herself. Um, like now sometimes um you find me not doing my homework and um actually not worrying about the fact that my homework is not done until I realise uh the consequences that I have to face afterwards or um how it's affecting my marks"* (Participant 1).

In this case, the lack of motivation and parental involvement, previously given by mum, is thought to be a cause of poor performance at school. Since a lot of what is done at high school level involves research assignments and projects, Participant 1 feels that in the absence of her mum and the role she played in monitoring homework, her results have suffered. She explains:

*"There's no one to really check if my homework is done or is um all my work is, if I'm actually going through all my work thoroughly, um such as, as I said with projects, if I'm doing my assignments up to the standard of work that it, they should be, to aim for 100% in my marks. It's just like I do it because I do it um because of all that support being gone, although I still try on my own, but it's not the same"* (Participant 1).

In addition, some children spoke of a tendency to slip in and out of concentration in class, they spoke of how they would often find themselves daydreaming. Participant 3 described his lapses in concentration like this:

*"Okay, I'm concentrating, I'm concentrating, but... something small can distract me"* (Participant 3).

When this happened, he and the others found themselves thinking about their parents or about their future and what will become of their lives.

Miller (2006) cites a number of studies, which outline the problems children of incarcerated parents face. These include cognitive setbacks, developmental delays and inadequate coping mechanisms. They may have difficulty reaching developmental goals such as developing relationships, "...trust, autonomy, initiative, productivity and identity" (Seymour 1998, cited in Miller, 2006, p. 478). When learners are afforded the appropriate support and resources, these children can successfully overcome their challenges; but when challenges exceed the child's ability to cope, it can cause significant developmental delays. However, it must be established that in this study, only indirect associations between parental incarceration and educational performance could be established. Having said that, and given the prevalence of parental incarceration in our society the possibility that links can be drawn through thorough research cannot be ignored.

### ***Teachers' perceptions of learners***

According to the children, their academic results reflected noticeable changes following their parent's arrest. Since many teachers were unaware of the arrest, it was interesting to investigate what these teachers would attribute the change in academic performance to. Participant 2 was asked how his teachers had responded to his declining performance:

*"Well they'll say, 'You're lazy,' or, 'You just, you don't want to learn,' or, 'You don't want to study or do something' or they'll forever blame it on something else which, well they can't judge because they don't know what's happening"*  
(Participant 2).

The teachers often do observe lapses in performance, but owing to lack of knowledge, they cannot make an informed decision as to the cause. In such instances, teachers often look to other reasons for the decline. Participant 3 explained how his teachers expressed many misunderstandings regarding him and his poor performance:

*“They just say uh a lot of misunderstandings, they just say I’ve got what you say, a bad attitude things like that and they also say I’m associating myself with the wrong crowd, things like that” (Participant 3).*

The fact that even the teachers are aware of a drop in results makes it apparent that the incarceration has a definite effect on academic performance. However, as Participant 1 points out, had the teacher taken the time to enquire as to why the child’s academic performance is suffering, they might be more understanding in this regard.

*“Because uh my marks are higher than they are now, or used to be higher than they are now, they just, uh th-they gather that I’ve become lazy about my work. They don’t think that that is because there is something wrong or because I need some sort of guidance or anything like that because they don’t know of any changes that have curred, that have occurred in my life. So they just, you find that I’ll just get normal detention or normal misconduct or just um be punished in any uh in any way as much as the other children um because they don’t understand, um they don’t know of any situation change at home or anything like that” (Participant 1).*

The children acknowledge that in not informing their teachers of the occurrences at home they have placed themselves at a disadvantage because the teachers then cannot link the performance indicators directly to the causal factor, which is the imprisonment. Therefore, they do not hold their teachers responsible for not being equipped to assist them in this regard.

#### **4.3.3 School-based support**

During this study, it became quite apparent that many of these learners did not want their schools or teachers to know of the imprisonment. Earlier in this chapter, the reasons as to why they were so reluctant emerged. In this section, I questioned the learners on what they think schools could do to become more amenable and supportive in this regard.

The first strategy pointed out by Participant 3 was school-home contact.

*“Okay a school should like be more in contact with the parents of the children. So if they were more in contact, they would know that uh my mum is in prison”*

(Participant 3).

This strategy was consistent with that of Rossen (2011). Participant 3 felt that since learners were less inclined to open up to their teachers on sensitive matters such as these, schools should make it their duty to keep in close and constant contact with their parents or guardians. In this way, they will have first hand knowledge of the occurrences at home. This also eliminates the awkwardness children might feel in having to inform their teachers of what is occurring at home. He explained that this was the process undertaken by his primary school teachers and that is how they were able to understand his behavioural and academic changes following the arrest. He also points out that a school may house many children with situations similar to his and if schools took the time to enquire thoroughly into each learner’s background, they might discover a wealth of information, which could be useful in handling delicate matters at school. Participant 4 concurs; he simply states that schools should pay closer attention to the needs of their children.

The second strategy, highlighted by Participant 2 involved the inclusion of counselling as part of teacher training. He feels that this would better equip teachers to deal with issues of a sensitive nature at school. He says:

*“Most teachers, they don’t know how to deal with uh children... like maybe they don’t have children of their own or they don’t understand”* (Participant 2).

He feels that a lack of knowledge and understanding places the teacher at a great disadvantage when it comes to tackling certain issues. If counselling strategies became part of teacher training, teachers would be able to assist their learners and learners would feel far more comfortable disclosing their issues to their teachers.

Strategy 3, suggested by Participant 3, proposed the employment of guidance counsellors at each school. He explains:

*“I think um um schools should have like counsellors cause a lot of things happen at home that uh that kids don’t really talk about but then it’s not it’s not good to have things bottled inside you just got to let it all out. So if all the schools had counsellors, it would be a lot better”* (Participant 3).

Participant 2 also pointed out that he tended to bottle up his feelings at times because there was no one at school he could really confide in. It may be reassuring to have a guidance counsellor at the school so that the children have a confidante at their disposal, although not every child may utilise their services, their mere presence might reassure them that there is someone they can share their feelings with and who is prepared and equipped to counsel them.

Participant 1 puts the presence of a school guidance counsellor into perspective:

*“When you go through something like this, it’s uh it’s very good knowing or uh ya, it’s very good knowing that uh that you have somebody else that can understand or they can’t really understand, but when you talking to them, when you talking to someone and they’re listening to you and you actually gathering that they understand, um it really is good to-to know that there is that somebody, it’s like having someone in your corner, someone that you can just turn to whenever and say, ‘I need to talk’ and then you talk, they listen and they understand”* (Participant 1).

She explains that speaking to someone who is equipped with counselling strategies is very different to speaking to friends or others who just show pity yet cannot really do much to help. Participant 3 concurs; he explains that although it is natural for people to show sadness, the last thing you really want to hear when you are going through such a situation is pity. Participant 1 explains this in more detail:

*“Sometimes you know, when you go through whatever situation you go through there really are moments that you go through where you just feel like talking and*

*just talking without anybody that's gonna talk back to you, because some people they quick on advising you and you know saying, 'Nxa, shame, sorry.' Um those are not really, always things that make you feel any better. Although people say it, uh the things that uh you know, if I'm able to open up about it and really talk about it, whether I wanna cry or I wanna yell or I wanna say anything, whether I wanna hate somebody, but having somebody that can just be there and just say I understand it all, really is comfort-comforting" (Participant 1).*

The children feel like only a qualified counsellor will be equipped with the skills to engage in such talks with them. However, they do realise that due to financial and human resource constraints, ensuring that every school had a counsellor is not always possible. Furthermore, most teachers have already been through teacher training without counselling strategies. Therefore, Participant 2 pointed out an alternative measure. He suggests that schools nominate or train certain teachers who may be equipped to counsel learners and utilise them in this supportive role. He says:

*"A school can find a teacher or I can say someone who can deal with children who are in this situation which I am in and like the thing is, with children uh in schools, you can't come out with this and just talk about it. It's not easy because the first thing that goes through your mind is that people will know about it and how will they treat you and maybe they'll laugh at you and you won't cope at school" (Participant 2).*

Therefore, he suggests the utilisation of teachers who learners feel comfortable talking to, and who can help the child through their situations.

Although it may appear that having a school counsellor or teacher at school may encourage learners to open up about their feelings, this is not always the case. Participant 1 explains that although her school does have a qualified guidance counsellor, she has never really felt the need to speak to her. So although it may seem like a useful option, it does not always work. Perhaps this links up with the awkwardness learners feel in discussing their lives with "outsiders" at school. It was also striking how three of the four participants and their families did not inform their school principals or teachers of the incarceration, as they did not want them involved. It becomes apparent from this that unless schools take measures to discover



more about their learners, using their own devices, they will be left largely uninformed and in a very poor position to offer help and support to learners.

Lastly, as Rossen (2011) suggests, the learners pointed out that teachers could by their own devices, learn a great deal about their learners if they took a greater interest in the learner's lives. Participant 2 described his thoughts on this:

*"I'd say in my school, teachers some of them come to school maybe they frustrated about things that happened with their own personal life and some don't even care about teaching and stuff, they just wanna to do their work and just get done with it. But then, they don't want to have you know that bond with learners and understand them, so they don't want to make it easier for them to understand stuff you know and mostly they wanna expose you, like they'll say if you don't raise your hand and say you don't understand then it's your problem or anything, something like that"* (Participant 2).

Participant 2 believes that teachers are in an excellent position to help learners but many do not maximise on the powerful role they can play in the children's lives. Rather than looking for problems, teachers need to delve into the possible reasons for why the child may be experiencing problems at school and work towards helping them. He feels that if teachers developed a stronger bond with their learners, they would then be able to detect when their learners are going through difficulties. This, he says, can be achieved by using the following tool to learn more about the learner's lives:

*"When isn't how they give us tests and stuff, if they see like a learner that's having a problem with a certain thing. Maybe they could go to them, you know, privately and ask them, 'Is everything all right at home?' or find out about stuff. Because it's it's not like most people uh every child fails, it's maybe 1, 2 or 3, and they should do something about that, just to find out what's going on with their life, their background and stuff because we all come from different backgrounds"* (Participant 2).

He adds that if teachers took the time just to find out why learners' marks are dropping or behaviours are changing, by just asking a few questions they may discover what is really

troubling the child and then do something to help them. It may also help to develop stronger bonds with the learners, not just a teacher-child relationship, but also one where children feel free and comfortable enough to talk freely about what is occurring in their lives. He simply says that the biggest obstacle for children like him right now at school is:

*“Teachers do not show that interest, beyond the classroom and beyond the book and beyond everything”* (Participant 2).

Teacher awareness may also assist teachers when preparing lessons with sensitive content or when dealing with discipline problems (Rossen, 2011). With a clearer understanding of the children, their home circumstances and experiences, teachers can stand themselves in good stead to be a source of guidance and support for their learners. Perhaps this may be key to helping our teachers in the future, develop stronger bonds and show greater interest in the lives of the learners, so that when problems do arise, we are well informed and therefore in an advantageous position to offer assistance.

#### **4.4 Main findings of the study**

This study firstly delved into the scholastic experiences of children who have parents in prison. The investigation took cognisance of other factors, which also influence schooling and acknowledges that parental incarceration is but one of many other factors. The findings revealed several experiences, which may be reactions to separation from a parent. Parent-child separation caused strain on the child's emotions, some responded with acting out behaviours, in the form of discipline or behavioural problems; others displayed acting in behaviours, whereby they preferred to isolate themselves from others (Fritsch & Burkhead, 1981, cited in Johnson, 2007, p. 6). This is consistent with the strain theory (Hagan, 1996) which posits that the removal of a parent from the family system is likely to introduce or emphasize strain in the life of the child. The “loss” of a parent also causes significant disruptions in terms of residential and financial stability (Parke & Clarke-Steward, 2002; Tasca *et al.*, 2011; Cunningham, 2001). Standard routine in the home changes to accommodate the absent parent. In some instances, children changed schools, homes or transport routines, had to move in with family or be supervised by guardians. These disruptions often meant a change of roles for children, increased responsibility, and learning to be far more self-sufficient (Nesmith & Ruhland, 2008). One area requiring significant

change was homework routines, where less adult supervision meant more independent work. Increased responsibilities placed greater strain on the child and often influenced the standard of work produced.

The findings also revealed a reluctance amongst learners to inform teachers and friends of the imprisonment, partly for fear of being ostracised but largely because the need had never arisen. Although, in some instances, a few friends or teachers were aware of the imprisonment, the children did not feel the need to deliberately inform other people. In some cases, it was easier for the children to converse with a complete stranger, like a researcher, as opposed to school staff. The children were also far more comfortable sharing their experiences with close friends who had been through similar experiences, as they felt they could relate to them. Although it is expected that children, due to their very nature of innocence and ignorance, would not understand the plight of incarceration, the children in this study found their friends to be very empathetic and supportive in this regard, in some cases even more so than school staff. Bowlby's (1982) attachment theory highlights the socio-emotional importance the development of relationships between parent and child. In the absence of a parent, the teacher is one adult in the child's life who may play a pivotal role as someone the child may draw attachments to. However, this study has found that learners often chose not to inform their teachers and drew attachments to their peers instead.

It was remarkable how well the learners managed to keep silent about their home situations even to the extent that school principals and teachers had no inkling of what the child was experiencing at home. Children found teachers to be unapproachable and rather insensitive, hence their reluctance to inform them of the imprisonment. Children disliked the piteous approach adopted by teachers and the manner in which they inadvertently draw attention to their experiences. In other instances, the children whose teachers had somehow come to know of the imprisonment, found them to be quite helpful and supportive in this regard. Other findings alluded to teacher and learner approaches to sensitive subject matter. Teacher responses varied with knowledge, so those who were aware of the imprisonment were far more cautious in their approach to sensitive content. Learner responses to class discussions varied, while some saw their position as beneficial in this respect, others tended to avoid such discussions at all costs.

Perhaps one of the most interesting findings was the children's awareness of the influence the imprisonment had on their behaviour. Some, especially the much younger boys, acknowledged that the imprisonment had had negative effects on their behaviour, causing them to act out. The girl however displayed signs of acting in behaviours (Fritsch & Burkhead, 1981, cited in Johnson, 2007, p. 6). In light of the psychological parenting theory (Davis, 1996), these behavioural changes could easily be linked to parent-child separation caused by parental incarceration. It is not uncommon for children to exhibit behavioural regression when contact with a parent has been interrupted. However, there were also signs of positive change in behaviour over time, with age, understanding, and maturity.

The findings also revealed that parental incarceration had an influence over the extra-curricular and co-curricular activities undertaken by the child. Lack of parental involvement and increased responsibilities in the home had significantly reduced the activities undertaken by some children (Nesmith & Ruhland, 2008). The results revealed that these children no longer had the time to continue with or pursue additional activities at school. Most children thought of engaging in sport as rather pointless especially if their parents were not around to encourage and support them. In contrast, there was one case where the child admitted to using sport as an outlet and thrived on his participation in sport more than academic involvement.

The study also aimed to explore the possibility that the above-mentioned experiences might influence the academic performance of the child. The children themselves observed deteriorations in their performances. While some attributed the demer solely to the incarceration, others felt that it was the subsequent changes following the arrest which had negatively influenced their performances. A lack of parental involvement left the children with feelings of despair and anxiety when it came to their academic performance (Poehlmann *et al.*, 2010). The children also mentioned a tendency to lose concentration in class, which they believe had a negative influence on their performance. According to the children, their teachers also noticed changes in their results but since they are unaware of the factors driving the change, they often found other reasons to justify these changes.

Lastly, the study aimed to identify possible support structures, which could be utilized at schools to provide better encouragement and support for children experiencing similar situations at home. The learners put forward a number of suggestions. School staff needs to

promote school-home contact. Regular contact with parents provides teachers with first-hand knowledge of developments in the home and places the teacher in a knowledgeable position to understand and provide support and assistance when necessary (Rossen, 2011). Employing school counsellors or training teachers in guidance counselling might persuade children to speak about their issues. They will be less inclined to suppress their emotions or display erratic behaviours at school. It also places the teacher in a position whereby he or she can be more approachable and assist the child beyond the classroom. The findings also revealed that many teacher-child relationships lacked that special connection which made learners feel comfortable enough to talk through sensitive issues with their teachers. The children felt that if teachers took a genuine interest in learner performances or behaviours, they might actually glean better understanding about the child (Rossen, 2011).

In conclusion, the findings of this study reveal that the incarceration of a parent is a causal factor for various scholastic experiences, often having a negative influence on the academic performance of the child. However, with greater interest, enhanced teacher training and stronger bonds, school staff may be in the perfect position to help the child.

#### **4.5 Conclusion**

The above data revealed some of the experiences of children who have parents in prison. The information highlighted turmoil created by separation from a parent, financial and residential instability, children's feelings surrounding disclosure to friends and teachers, dealing with sensitive subject matter related to criminality and imprisonment, behavioural changes and participation in extra-curricular and co-curricular activities.

The information presented here created a platform for understanding the impact of imprisonment on the academic performance of the child. From the discussion, it became apparent that the imprisonment did have both direct and indirect impacts on the academic performance of learners and for teachers this would be a telling sign of changes within the home.

The results also revealed a necessity for schools to develop support structures to facilitate positive learning for these children and attention was drawn to the pivotal role the teacher can play in achieving this end. To follow is the final chapter of this study, which summarises the

findings and provides recommendations that can be employed by policymakers, administrators, and teachers.

## **CHAPTER FIVE**

### **SUMMARY AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

#### **5.1 Introduction**

This report included a study into the scholastic experiences of children who have parents in prison, the subsequent impact on their academic performance and how schools can be more effective support structures in this regard. In this final chapter, a summary of findings as well as recommendations based on these findings will be presented.

This study endeavoured to answer three research questions:

1. What are the schooling experiences of children who have a parent/s in prison?
2. How do these experiences affect their academic performance?
3. How can schools meet the needs of learners with parents in prison?

The findings of this study will assist in creating awareness amongst school staff of the schooling experiences of learners who have parents in prison. It will help educators to understand the links between parental incarceration, schooling experiences, and academic performance, whilst affording them the opportunity to reflect on and improve on their current practice. The study also suggests school-based support structures, which may encourage open communication and prevent learners from suppressing their feelings regarding the incarceration. Finally, it provides educators with tools to facilitate positive learning for these children in a sensitive yet supportive manner.

#### **5.2 Summary of findings**

The current study investigated the impact of parental incarceration on a child's academic functioning. Literature provided in chapter two highlighted a number of factors that can be linked both directly and indirectly to parental incarceration. Outlined below are the findings of this study:

- The impact of separation from parents on general functioning and well-being,
- The impact on family dynamics,
- The effects of limited adult supervision and assistance,



- Fear of disclosure,
- The effect on behaviour and academic performance,
- School-based support.

### ***5.2.1 The impact of separation from parents on general functioning and well-being***

Literature presented in chapter two suggested that parental incarceration would effect similar reactions as any other form of parent-child separation. However, when it came to parental incarceration, these reactions may be heightened by the ambiguous loss of the parent (Boss, 1999, 2004, 2006). Ambiguous loss refers to loss where the loved one is still alive but is no longer physically available to the child. This study confirmed other established studies conducted by Parke and Clarke-Steward (2002) and Hagan (1996) which stated that children would feel a wave of emotions following the arrest and they responded to these emotions in several ways. Some children suppressed their feelings or detached themselves from the situation whilst others retaliated with poor behaviour or academic decline. The children were very aware of their parent's absence and admitted to feeling deprived, experiencing what they called a "void" in their lives. They often compared themselves to other children who had their parents around and expressed a desire to interact and "bond" with their parent in the same way. The children felt that their parent played a strong role in motivating and encouraging them at school. Literature (Johnson, 2007) alluded to the possibility that the gender of the incarcerated parent might present varying reactions from the child. This could not be firmly established through the study as most of the children had female parents in prison. Overall, this study could not identify specific negative outcomes which may be attributed directly to parental incarceration alone. However, consistent with results from a study conducted by Johnson and Easterling (2012, p. 347), there are indications that parental incarceration "appears to negatively affect child well-being above and beyond a variety of sociodemographic adversities." They point out that these effects may reflect differently for different children and are dependent on family dynamics and societal contexts.

### ***5.2.2 The impact on family dynamics***

There were significant changes in living arrangements following a mother's arrest. Researchers, Mackintosh *et al.*, (2006), found that in the absence of the mother, some children found themselves living with extended family and guardians as opposed to living with their fathers. This was also the case for two children in this study, who now reside with

guardians. In the absence of the father, families experienced greater financial distress and poor discipline, whereas the absence of the mother, contributed to a lack of emotional support from home and greater responsibilities for the child (Parke & Clarke-Steward, 2002). Regardless of the gender of the parent, residential and financial instability is a common thread in these households. The subsequent movements between parents, guardians and foster homes, made the children aware of the many disruptions the arrest had brought into their lives. Consistent with research conducted by Tasca *et al.*, (2011), loss of income from the arrested parent meant lifestyle modifications, changing homes, suburbs and even schools. In some instances, children were also separated from their siblings. The study confirmed these changes were very prominent amongst families of prisoners. The children relayed feelings of awkwardness in their new settings, even when they continued living in the same houses, they described it as not feeling quite like “home” any longer. They missed their parent and desired to have their family units back intact. Children residing with guardians did not receive as much attention as they did before and felt uncomfortable discussing their feelings and needs with their guardians.

Like other children in similar situations, the children spoke of alterations to routines, less supervision and greater responsibilities in the home (Tasca *et al.*, 2011). While one felt he had to take care of the family home while his mum was away, a huge responsibility for a 17 year old, others felt compelled to take care of their younger siblings as well. They took on greater responsibilities in the home and had to become far more independent in a very short space of time (Aaron & Dallaire, 2010). With little adult supervision for homework, the children had to fend for themselves, or in some cases, homework was just disregarded. For older learners, projects and assignments, which needed computer access, meant saving up and making trips to town in order to have this work completed. Without their parent’s assistance, the children had to learn self-sufficiency very quickly.

### ***5.2.3 The effects of limited adult supervision and assistance***

The absence of one parent also meant that remaining parents, guardians or caregivers had little, if any time to spend with the children. As alluded to earlier, parents were seldom available to offer support or encouragement in extra-curricular and co-curricular activities at school so these activities often fell by the wayside (Rossen, 2011). Changes in parenting roles, in terms of discipline and financial providers, previously held by two parents is now transferred to one person, and it may be difficult for children to conceptualise these new roles

(Tasca *et al.*, 2011). As a result, when for example, mum, after having always been the nurturer, suddenly begins enforcing discipline, the child who is not accustomed to her enforcing discipline, may disregard her in her new role. This may lead to even greater problems involving discipline. Parental roles may change outside the home as well. With increased financial strain, remaining parents or caregivers might have to work longer hours, resulting in a reduction of quality time spent with children (Aaron & Dallaire, 2010). The consequences of reduced parental supervision could result in behavioural problems and emotional strain for both the parent and child (Tasca *et al.*, 2011).

#### **5.2.4 Fear of disclosure**

There is some sense of culpability or shame attached to the imprisonment of a parent (Cunningham, 2001). The children are aware of changes in the attitudes of neighbours and extended family members. As a result, many children are reluctant to disclose their parents' whereabouts to teachers and friends, for fear of stigmatisation (Phillips & Gates, 2011). Their biggest trepidation was that people, especially teachers, would start treating them differently to other children. Children did have this experience with some teachers and thus felt that teachers were inadequately equipped to deal with such issues at school level. Since many schools did not make thorough enquiries into the child's backgrounds, it was rather easy to keep these secrets from friends and teachers. However, for other children whose friends and teachers had learned of the imprisonment, the fears they had anticipated changed as they found them to be rather supportive in this regard (Nesmith & Ruhland, 2008).

The children also found that they could relate better to children who had gone through other forms of separation from their parents. Although there is some reluctance to inform others of the home situation, disclosure at times has proved to be beneficial for the child, but as Weissman and Mayer LaRue (1998) state, this can only be achieved when trust has been established between the various parties involved. The manner in which people respond and express concern is a huge factor for children and greatly influences their decisions on who to inform. The same applies to the teaching of sensitive subject matter, particularly related to criminality and imprisonment. Children felt they would be at an advantage in these areas due to their first-hand experience while others felt very awkward in such instances and would remove themselves from sensitive discussions. They found teachers to be a lot more cautious when they were aware of the child's experiences but they were not critical of those teachers who were uninformed.

### ***5.2.5 The effect on behaviour and academic performance***

The children were surprisingly aware of the changes within their behaviours following the arrest. They acknowledged behavioural changes in the form of aggression and anger (Kjellstrand & Eddy, 2011a; 2011b); others displayed poor discipline both at home and at school (Hagan, 1996). In other instances, children withdrew socially, displaying suppressive behaviours (Seymour, 1998). They were also keenly aware of a decline in their academic performances as well (Johnson & Easterling, 2012; Hagan, 1996). They contend that this must be attributed to the incarceration and the fact that their lifestyles have changed so drastically. Parents were no longer there to guide and support them as they had been before. They experience concentration problems, expressing concern for their parent's welfare and their future. Teachers often notice these behavioural and academic changes but their reactions are largely determined by whether they have been informed of the imprisonment. With no prior knowledge, teachers try to rationalise these behaviours, they reduce it to laziness or keeping bad company. The children acknowledge that those teachers who are knowledgeable are far better equipped to deal with these changes but they also believe, like Rossen (2011), that it is the duty of the school and teacher to make enquiries and discover more about the backgrounds of their learners.

### ***5.2.6 School-based support***

The children suggested a few school-based support strategies, which may be employed by school staff to assist their learners with similar experiences. Consistent with Rossen (2011) and Parke and Clarke-Steward (2002), the children suggest close and constant school-home contact, which will keep schools and teachers updated on the lives of their learners. Teacher training should incorporate courses on guidance and counselling so staff members are better equipped to offer support and assistance to children of prisoners. Alternatively, schools could employ counsellors who could assist in this regard. The children believe that teachers are at a very advantageous position to offer assistance to children. Rossen (2011) says that teachers need to engage with, and develop stronger bonds with their learners on a more personal level. In so doing, they will gain valuable insight into the lives of the child and will be far better equipped to deal with concerns and issues regarding their learners. Children will also feel more comfortable speaking to and confiding in their teachers.

### **5.3 Recommendations**

It is evident that many facets of a child's life would be affected by parental incarceration; hence addressing their needs would involve a combination of efforts from family systems, policy developers, communities, and schools. This study identified several factors which can be related to parental incarceration and which have consequences for schooling. In this section I put forward some recommendations in this regard.

#### ***5.3.1 Family systems and dynamics***

This study has shown that family dynamics has a pivotal influence on how children cope with and deal with parental incarceration. Therefore, intervention aimed at these children should have a large focus on the family itself. The study highlighted the children's experiences of distress regarding the separation from their parents (McGowan & Blumenthal, 1978, cited in Hagan, 1996) and there is much controversy surrounding the disclosure of parental incarceration to children. Some argue that non-disclosure might protect the child from the knowledge of their parent's misdeeds and reduce the trauma associated with separation (Becker & Margolin, 1967, cited in Parke & Clarke-Steward, 2002). Others believe that the stress the child experiences may only be exacerbated by secrecy and silence, but the impact of silence or deception on children may be profound. Ayers, Sandier, West and Roosa (1996) state that uncertainty and lack of information undermines the child's ability to cope, resulting in the development of fear and anxiety regarding the separation. Children therefore need honest, factual information regarding their parent's whereabouts (Nolen-Hoeksema & Larson, 1999). They also need to have their feelings acknowledged and validated. With this, children are equipped to better understand their situations, the reasons for separation, and as Parke and Clarke-Steward (2002, p. 5) point out, they are then able to "begin the dual process of grieving the loss of their parent and coping with their new life circumstances". On the other hand, in certain instances non-disclosure can be validated if it is meant to avoid complications. Some families keep children uninformed to avoid jobs, housing, schooling and social grants from being jeopardized (Johnston, 1995).

An important factor for child adjustment to parental incarceration is regular contact with their parent. Although visits to prisons may evoke discomfort and distress (Poehlmann, 2005b) the absence of contact with the parent might be even more damaging for the child (Shlafer & Poehlmann, 2010). Ultimately, the decision to maintain contact between the parent and child



should be determined by that which is best for the well-being of the child. Poehlmann *et al.*, (2010, p. 594) explain that “as is the case with any decisions regarding contact with a non-resident parent, it is essential to maintain that contact, and the potential for a relationship [with the incarcerated parent], is in the child’s best interest.” They believe that though the determination of what is in the best interest of the child may be subjective, it would revolve around a multitude of pre-existing as well as existing factors, such as the parent-child relationship prior to arrest.

Caregivers and guardians might consider the benefits of other forms of contact, like letters, or telephone calls. These may serve well in establishing a relationship between the parent and child prior to visitation. Where the demographics and financial costs of visitations are not feasible, then mail messages may serve as an effective alternative. Loper and Tuerk (2006) explain that the system of writing up and mailing letters can be beneficial in the sense that it allows for flexibility and control for senders, recipients, and caregivers. Establishing contact would eliminate the feelings of ambiguous loss (Boss, 1999, 2004, 2006) and serves to re-establish that “bond” between parent and child.

Honest, open contact with parents also reduces feelings of abandonment and loneliness, which is often associated with separation from parents. Children may better understand the circumstances surrounding the imprisonment and may thus be better equipped to deal with it.

It has been stated earlier that the gender of the incarcerated parent often determines the child’s living arrangements following an arrest. Usually, children will continue living with their mothers after their father’s incarceration, and after a mother’s incarceration residency is often with next of kin (Mumola, 2000). For children, living with remaining parents gives them a sense of continuity and security whilst living with kin tends to provide a more stable home environment with familiar people. Although it is assumed that kinship care would offer more stability than foster care, this has not been supported by any comparative studies or literature.

Regardless of whom the child takes up residency with, adjustment to these changes can be positive if a stimulating and safe family environment has been created for the child. In addition, Werner (2000) suggests that children benefit from affectionate ties with alternate caregivers. This is in line with Bowlby’s attachment theory (1973, as cited in Parke &

Clarke-Steward, 2002), which states that children are able to form multiple attachments to parents as well as non-maternal caregivers. It is believed that children who have “lost” a parent, can be helped by forming or maintaining healthy and secure relationships with alternate caregivers. According to Werner (2000, p. 123), the most resilient of children are those who in the face of trauma or difficulty “have had the opportunity to establish a close bond with at least one person who provided them with stable care and from whom they received adequate and appropriate attention” during stressful times. Several scholars (Eddy & Chamberlain, 2000; Knutson, DeGarmo, & Reid, 2004; Martinez & Forgatch, 2002; Reid & Patterson, 1989) cited in Kjellstrand and Eddy (2011b, p. 553) believe that the creation of home environments with such secure attachments, not only “...cultivate a child’s cognitive and language development, but can also increase a child’s emotional and behavioural health during a stressful period”.

Incarceration leads to lifestyle changes, economic hardships and shifts in care giving arrangements. For caregivers, be it remaining parents or guardians, this may sometimes evoke a range of emotions including depression, anger, and physical strain. The manners in which they handle these changes will inevitably have an indirect effect on the child (Parke & Clarke-Steward, 2002). They must therefore adopt positive coping strategies, being mindful of the child at all times. Although it may be difficult amongst all the strain, they ought to make themselves available to the child as a source of help and support.

Engstrom (2008) argues that since the family processes surrounding the child’s life greatly influences their reactions to their parent’s imprisonment, caregivers, grandparents and guardians should thus be included in intervention programmes which are designed to strengthen family bonds. Families could collaborate with schools and communities to foster better communication between these entities and give families opportunities to exercise positive family relations (Aaron & Dallaire, 2010). Moreover, programmes aimed at reducing child and family maladjustment should follow arrests.

### ***5.3.2 Policy, administrative and community alternatives***

With regard to policy, Adalist-Estrin (1994) recommends a connection of systems. Gaps in the system result in what Parke and Clarke-Steward (2002) call fragmented service and unmet needs. They suggest that various systems which provide services for children affected by imprisonment need to combine in their efforts across time to ensure continuity of services.



Judicial procedures are perhaps the most important avenue for change. Currently, the judicial system takes little cognisance of the needs of children during parental incarceration but this can be addressed by giving careful consideration to the needs of children during the sentencing process. Nesmith and Ruhland (2008) furnish a number of suggestions for how this can be achieved. They contend that pre-sentencing investigations can be conducted to review the potential consequences of parental incarceration on families and children. Policies should privy the needs of children during the time of sentencing and throughout the duration of imprisonment, and consider revising prison visitation policies to create a more child-friendly environment (Nesmith & Ruhland, 2008). The criminal justice system must be involved in the process of making decisions and provisions for family contact and support (Parke & Clarke-Steward, 2002). When selecting prison facilities, courts ought to consider the distance between family homes and prison facilities.

School administration must realise that the school is but a small part of a larger community. Often social stigmas and attitudes towards prisoners and their families are grounded in popular stereotypes formulated within communities and generally fuelled by sensationalism in media. By forging partnerships with the greater community, school administrators can work towards reducing popular stereotypes. By collecting information about the children and the communities in which they live, school administrators can prepare themselves and their staff to act as support systems for vulnerable children. The school is also a direct link between children and other support systems, such as social welfare organisations, as such schools are key to enlisting community resources in times of need and school staff should be vigilant to the needs of their children and make use of these resources when necessary.

Policy change extends beyond judicial systems and school administration to social welfare systems and community systems as well, which are also involved with the family members who are involved with the families of prisoners. Social policy ought to address public attitudes and stigmas attached to parental incarceration and the families affected. There should be greater community awareness and a strong collaboration between agencies serving the needs of children. Educating the wider community can create awareness of the existence of children within communities who are affected by parental imprisonment, reduce social stigma, and open up new resources to address their needs. It can also serve in the development of more humane policies and greater empathy towards the difficulties encountered by affected families.

Creating support for affected children need not be an isolated effort. There are many community organisations that can collaborate with schools and families to form a chain of support. Nesmith and Ruland (2008) speak of a new initiative, which had been introduced in the USA in 2008, which aimed to support communities and organisations for youth affected by incarceration. This initiative hoped to facilitate the development of caring adults who were able to connect with the youth in three key areas: “family, school, and community” (Bush, 2008, cited in Nesmith & Ruhland, 2008). This initiative encourages collaboration between community recreation centres and other youth programmes to work together with children affected by parental incarceration. It called for the creation of support groups and specially designed activities as efforts to reach out to these children. Organisations, such as these, can set up mentoring programmes for children. Schools can be both a place, which encounter children affected by parental incarceration, and a neutral place to set up and facilitate support groups for organisations and the families of children affected by parental incarceration. This may also provide opportunities for school staff to become better equipped and informed to deal with the phenomenon at school level, but this will be discussed in greater detail in the next section.

### ***5.3.3 School-based emotional support***

The children of prisoners have many special needs within the school context. Cunningham (2001) states that stigma and secrecy often keep these children under the radar, but in order to minimise the impacts of parental incarceration, their needs have to be acknowledged. If this is not done, we reinforce the risk on inter-generational problems, such as poor education, disadvantage and crime. Advocates for children with parents in prison face a dilemma of whether to treat these children as a distinct group or treating parental incarceration as one of the many childhood experiences, which may adversely affect the child (Phillips & Gates, 2011). So rather than individually identifying the children of prisoners, advocacy efforts can instead focus on policy development and practices, which would actually equip schools to effectively address the needs of this often-marginalised group. Effective practice would treat these children in the same way as other children who have encountered separation from a parent due to death or divorce, for instance.

There has been a considerable amount of research into the behavioural and emotional consequences of parental incarceration. Adverse behaviour is the outcome of separation from

a parent and is often an external response to inner emotional turmoil. In response, teachers and school staff should refrain from seeing the child as the problem but rather work towards helping him or her deal with the emotions that drive it (Phillips & Gates, 2011). Teachers also need to change their own attitudes and behaviours, provide children with the support they need and teach them to develop a resilient response to their emotions.

Misunderstandings and negative sentiments affiliated with parental incarceration leaves many children with a strong desire to keep their parent's imprisonment a secret. Stigma and shame prevent children from sharing their experiences and acquiring the help they need. However, those who had somehow shared their secrets with others found it to be quite beneficial. Nesmith and Ruhland (2008) believe that general education into parental incarceration can reduce, amongst children and youth, that sense of taboo surrounding the phenomenon and allow freedom to open up and meet others in similar positions. Public education can thus advocate collaboration amongst families and children with similar needs. Educating children with accurate, age-appropriate information regarding incarceration minimises negative perceptions and will help clarify the perspective on parental incarceration and its impact on those who may be affected by it. In addition, for those children affected by parental incarceration, greater information can make incarceration more relevant to them, familiarising them to a phenomenon, which is generally tainted with ambiguity and uncertainty (Nesmith & Ruhland, 2008).

Too often, the real problems facing children at school are masked by other symptoms such as absenteeism, truancy, social isolation, delinquency, anxiety, depression, school failure, acting-in or acting-out behaviours (Johnson, 2007). It is important that they are afforded the support they need in order to remain at school and achieve both academically and socially. The school itself provides an ideal setting for identifying and extending support to this vulnerable group of children. Rossen (2011) offers some guidelines for school staff to make a positive impact on the lives of children with parents in prison. These suggestions will be discussed in the next few paragraphs.

Rossen (2011) suggests increasing learner-teacher connectedness. Developing caring relationships with at least one positive adult role model within the school reduces the likelihood that children will engage in risky behaviours. Teachers are in an excellent position to normalise and validate the child's emotions regarding the imprisonment. Relationships like

these, allow teachers to learn a great deal about the child's home circumstances and be knowledgeable when dealing with sensitive situations involving the child. Further, children who have little support from home may be encouraged to participate in more school activities when they know there is someone at school who is available to support them.

Rossen (2011) also suggests engaging children in extra-curricular and co-curricular activities. He believes that this would discourage the urge to isolate themselves from other children, and facilitate the development of a positive social network. It is important that teachers remediate specific areas of vulnerability in children and strive towards the promotion of self-esteem and self-efficacy. Schools must also aim to forge positive relationships with the child's primary caretakers (Rossen, 2011). It is likely that those left to care for children may be exposed to increased burdens and stressors, placing them at risk for mental and physical health problems. Teachers can maintain contact with these caretakers by providing regular updates and positive news on the child's progress. Not only does this keep the school informed on the parent's status at home but it also creates a sense of trust, uniformity, and organization between the home and school.

Moreover, it is important that teachers diarise and anticipate the days that may be particularly difficult for these children (Rossen, 2011). These include court dates, trial dates, birthdays, anniversaries, and Mother's Day or Father's Day. In the classroom, it is also important that teachers try to reduce triggers and provide reassurance as and when needed. Teachers must be sensitive towards absenteeism at times as well, as it may be related to events like prison visits. Anticipating behaviours preceding, and following prison visits, is also important (Rossen, 2011); children may come away from these visits with a range of emotions, providing adequate support at this time is critical. If teachers are well informed, they can help the child prepare for the visit by discussing details, such as procedures and rules, prior to visitation. Although contact between the parent and child is not always feasible, especially when the parent had been abusive or negligent, Johnston (1995) believes that the parent still plays a central role in the child's life and contact with them might provide the child with an outlet for their inner feelings of separation and loss. When visitation is not always possible, teachers can afford the children the opportunity, through learning, to write letters or diary entries, whereby they can convey their feeling to and about the people they miss (Rossen, 2011). So in some way, even if it is not physically possible, teachers must work towards preserving the child's connection to their parent.

The incarceration of a parent often results in increased responsibilities for the child at home. For teachers, flexibility is required when it comes to matters such as homework, projects, and assignments. Although a high standard of expectation must be set for all children, teachers must also be sensitive, use their professional judgement, and not be too rigid, especially in situations where children have little control over their circumstances. At the same time, it is important that teachers do not allow circumstance to lower their expectations of children. Children should still be encouraged to work hard and always do their best (Rossen, 2011). So even though situations change, it does not mean that the standards set by the child should be compromised. Regardless of behaviour or academic performance, it is important that teachers source out, focus on, and enhance the positive attributes of every child (Rossen, 2011). Children can be surprisingly resilient in times of trauma. Teachers would do well to remind learners of the strengths they possess when they seem to be in doubt.

Teachers should equip themselves with a keen awareness of the additional risks associated with parent-child separation and be on guard for behavioural or academic changes that may manifest over time. Although it is unlikely that these changes would take immediate effect, early detection of change can prompt swift remediation before the problem becomes insurmountable. Rossen (2011) suggests that schools have multidisciplinary teams, which collect data pertaining to discipline, academic performance or attendance, which can then be used to formulate methods of resolve.

Financial hardships have been identified as one of the outcomes of parental incarceration. Lack of finances can reduce provision for the child's basic needs and this may severely impede their ability to concentrate and learn (Rossen, 2011). Teachers and the school as a whole should try to find ways to provide for the needs of these children. Teachers can also encourage learners to ask for help.

Key to all the above is a change in attitudes amongst teachers and school administrators. Educators must be mindful of how they portray their own perceptions and attitudes about crime since much of what is learnt by children is influenced by the teachings, actions, and attitudes of their teachers. Teachers have significant influence over the knowledge, biases, and sensitivities acquired by their learners. They must therefore understand and recognise their own biases concerning incarceration. School staff must be educated and capacitated

with knowledge that will then shift their attitudes to make them more accepting, tolerant, and supportive of children with parents in prison. They should utilize their influential position to challenge public perceptions of crime and imprisonment whilst challenging ignorance amongst other staff and children. Through collaboration with relevant agencies, teachers should take it upon themselves to improve their own knowledge and expertise concerning parental incarceration. Not only will this make them more empathetic towards the needs of their learners, but they will also be in a good position to challenge popular beliefs and misconceptions concerning crime and imprisonment. Redefined attitudes in school staff and teachers will inevitably transform the opinions and mind-sets of the children they encounter as well.

Literature offers some strategies which could assist the children of offenders in coping with the experience of having a parent incarcerated. These strategies are summarised below.

- If the prior relationship between parent and child was positive, it is advisable to maintain that relationship through telephonic conversations or prison visitation.
- Children tend to adjust better to kinship placement with extended relatives or grandparents.
- Proper placement may also minimise issues of economic deprivation and a perpetual cycle of criminality.
- It is important that teachers and school staff change their attitudes and personal biases regarding incarceration so that children do not feel ostracised.
- Teachers should create positive learning environments, which accommodate the full range of learning needs, which these children may bring to school.
- Recognition and intervention when social stigmas and teasing occurs, is paramount.
- Schools ought to develop appropriate intervention programmes, which facilitate positive learning for these children.
- Encourage alternatives for dealing with anger, fear, rejection, and shame.
- Establish a sense of trust, support, and guidance between educator, child, and caregiver.
- Maintain accurate records of what is going on in the learner's home context.



- By developing and maintaining strong partnerships with the community, the school can acquire valuable resources and assistance, which may be useful in supporting these learners.
- The formulation of strong mentoring programmes and peer support groups is also advisable.
- The child will benefit from receiving consistent and trustworthy support from the adults who are present in their lives.

#### **5.4 Recommendations for future research**

Parental incarceration does not occur in a vacuum, instead it is a set of complex processes that unfold over a course of time. Thus, to fully conceptualise the phenomenon through research, the research design should incorporate prospective longitudinal studies, sometimes beginning even before the arrest takes place. This will enable researchers to follow the child's patterns of behaviour and accurately mark the changes, if any, that have taken place over time. Parke and Clarke-Steward (2002) state that this type of research begins with the identification of parents before incarceration takes place; this will help to establish pre-existing conditions and the type of relationships parents shared with their children. According to Murray *et al.*, (2012, p. 193), the collection of data from before, during and after arrest would help identify "within-individual change and isolate incarceration effects". It is believed that "this design would be a step toward disentangling the impact of incarceration per se from the impact of pre-existing family conditions on children's subsequent adjustment" (Parke & Clarke-Steward, 2002, p. 21). For researchers to analyse the development, moderators, and mediators of change over time, studies should include much larger samples, with repeated assessments, and multiple comparison groups, using a wide range of research tools. Research designs should include a number of standardised, developmentally sensitive measures that have adequate psychometric properties. These designs ought to include a variety of measurement tools with unbiased, direct assessment of children rather than intermediary reports from single sources, such as parents.

Research should hone in on the unique perspective of the child through the direct assessment of children themselves. This is best achieved by evaluating children's psychosocial functioning and coping mechanisms in a variety of contexts and with all the other relevant



role-players. Poehlmann *et al.*, (2010) believe that the inclusion and observation of child participants would help understand their strengths and weaknesses in the context of parental incarceration and allow for enhancement of intervention programmes through positive experience. Further, this type of research must also include investigations into institutional policies and practices that influence children's feelings and behaviours. Understanding these factors can assist in the development of meaningful intervention programmes that target all the relevant institutes conjunctly.

This study into parental incarceration touched on possible differentiations linked to gender; this refers to gender of both the incarcerated parent as well as the gender of the child. Future research could include closer examinations of the unique effects of gender roles and the effects on the child (Parke & Clarke-Steward, 2002). In addition, it is important to include investigations into family systems, cultural and ethnic backgrounds that are also predictors of children's reactions, transitions and coping mechanisms in the face of adversity (Parke & Clarke-Steward, 2002). So, research on children ought to consider the range of contexts, individual, family, cultural, institutional, all of which account for child adjustment to parental incarceration. Parke and Clarke-Steward (2002) urge for research guided by theory that they believe will not only plan to assist children in their immediate context, but will also test the efficacy of theory on a larger scale. Moreover, multidisciplinary as well as interdisciplinary approaches to research could provide opportunities for collaborative efforts to establish research and intervention into this phenomenon.

Despite growing interest into how parental incarceration relates to scholastic performance and achievement, more information into the roles of and influences of educational policy and practice on learning and development within the context of parental incarceration is needed. With more and more children affected by parental incarceration, it is important that additional research be conducted to explore their experiences and the potential consequences of parental incarceration for education. Studies would benefit from including the views of other role-players in education, such as educators, principals, school counsellors, incarcerated parents, guardians and children. This would provide more detailed descriptions of experiences which would then allow for better analysis.

To analyse the impact of parental incarceration on academic performance, data collection could include the examination of other data sources such as school discipline records, report

cards and psychometric and behavioural tests. This would allow for a range of data to be analysed against participant responses and may thus verify and substantiate participant responses. As mentioned earlier, prospective longitudinal studies with observations into behaviours and performance over a prolonged time might offer greater depth to research in this area. With better research, school policymakers and educators can make more informed decisions about education matters pertinent to the needs of children with parents in prison; these include aspects such as subject content, teacher attitudes, counselling strategies and changing education practice, whilst also drawing attention to the prevalence and increasing sensitivity towards this often marginalised group of children. Thorough research unlocks understanding as to why the incarceration of a parent results in undesirable outcomes for children, but more importantly, they provide valuable data for the development of efficient intervention programmes which prioritises the well-being of children of prisoners.

## **5.5 Conclusion**

The prolific society in which we live needs the system of incarceration to address issues of criminality, and it is effective in dealing with crime at an adult level. However, underlying the imprisonment of adults is a group of children who experience emotional incarceration as well. The number of children affected by parental incarceration in countries like South Africa is unprecedented. Identifying and understanding the unique effects of a parent's imprisonment on the child is a complex and delicate issue. In some cases, when the parent is considered a destructive or detrimental force, their separation from the child may be considered beneficial (Nesmith & Ruhland, 2008). However, as with any other form of parent-child separation, the absence of a parent is associated with unique stressors that can be harmful for the child's development and learning. With this in mind, this study drew attention to the impact of parental incarceration on children at school level. To do this, investigations into the experiences of a small group of school-going children were conducted. Although small and specific, their experiences offer insight into the impact the incarceration had on their lives, and their education in particular, it suggests directions that may be taken to better accommodate their needs both at home and at school in order to facilitate better adjustment and learning.

Several other effects on a child's life precede the ultimate effect of parental incarceration on education. Therefore, in order to understand the impact it has on education, one must firstly

consider all the other areas of life that also influence educational issues. We learnt that parental incarceration results in parent-child separation, residential and financial instability, and affects the child's well-being and functioning; all of these have both direct and indirect bearing on education. So in order to facilitate positive learning for children, careful consideration must be given to each of these areas, providing tools and support, which can make the experiences of parental incarceration less visible and stressful for the child.

There are a number of children, who despite all challenges, are able to overcome the adverse effects of parental incarceration and achieve positive outcomes. On the other hand, parental incarceration still has collateral consequences, which increases a child's risk for a variety of negative outcomes including emotional, behavioural, and academic difficulties (Lopez & Bhat, 2007). While many scholars may be affected by the phenomenon, fear of rejection, isolation and social stigma have kept them largely hidden. Although hidden, the challenges of parental incarceration will have inevitable consequences for schooling. It is therefore the duty of schools, educators, and administrators to learn how to support children through this time (Rossen, 2011). The foundation to providing effective support is increased understanding, awareness, and sensitivity towards the needs of individual learners. It involves changing attitudes and perceptions to create a more tolerant and accepting school environment where children would feel comfortable to play and learn.

Parent-child separation of any kind can have huge consequences for the child; children of prisoners are no different. At school, the consequences of parental incarceration can be manifested in an array of behavioural, academic, and socio-emotional problems, which can make learning a huge challenge for the child. Still, the school can be an ideal point of redress, where the unique needs of these learners are identified, addressed and overcome. This would require a great deal of collaboration between family, schools and communities. It also involves enormous effort on the part of schoolteachers, but the ultimate value attached to it would be incalculable. Although parental incarceration can be deemed a "death sentence" of a child's relationship with their parent, it need not have the same effect on education. The school can become a haven of motivation and support for the child; it can reduce the risk that the effects of parental incarceration could linger on in the child's life well into adulthood. With swift action as early as possible, school staff, most especially teachers, would be in the ideal position to help the children of prisoners to break the inter-generational cycles of

deprivation, academic decline, social exclusion, and crime, which often characterises parental incarceration.

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2 July 2013

Ms Nolene Moodley 203515906  
School of Education  
Edgewood Campus

Protocol reference number: HSS/0157/013M

Project title: Parents behind bars: Investigating the scholastic experiences of learners whose parent/s are incarcerated

Dear Ms Moodley

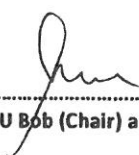
**Full Approval Notification – Committee Reviewed Protocol**

This letter serves to notify you that your response in connection with the above study has now been granted full approval.

Any alterations to the approved research protocol i.e. Questionnaire/Interview Schedule, Informed Consent Form, Title of the Project, Location of the Study must be reviewed and approved through an amendment /modification prior to its implementation. Please quote the above reference number for all queries relating to this study. Please note: Research data should be securely stored in the school/department for a period of 5 years

Best wishes for the successful completion of your research protocol

Yours faithfully

  
Professor U Bob (Chair) and Dr S Singh (Deputy Chair)  
/px

cc Supervisor: Mr HN Muribwathoho  
cc Academic Leader Research: Dr MN Davids  
cc School Administrator: Ms B Bhengu

Humanities & Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee  
Professor Urmilla Bob (Chair) and Dr Shenuka Singh (Deputy Chair)  
Westville Campus, Govan Mbeki Building

Postal Address: Private Bag X54001, Durban, 4000, South Africa

Telephone: +27 (0)31 260 3587/8350/4557 Facsimile: +27 (0)31 260 4609 Email: ximbap@ukzn.ac.za / snymanm@ukzn.ac.za / mohunp@ukzn.ac.za  
Website: www.ukzn.ac.za

Founding Campuses: ■ Edgewood ■ Howard College ■ Medical School ■ Pietermaritzburg ■ Westville

INSPIRING GREATNESS





**REQUEST TO CONDUCT RESEARCH AT YOUR SCHOOL**

23 July 2013

The Principal

\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

Dear Sir / Mam

This serves to inform you that I, Nolene Moodley, am a bona fide student of the University of Kwazulu Natal, pursuing my Masters Degree in Education. I am currently collecting data for my Master's project entitled, ***"Parents behind bars: Investigating the scholastic experiences of learners whose parent/s are incarcerated."*** The purpose of the study is to understand if and how the absence of a parent due to incarceration may or may not affect the scholastic experiences of the learners involved.

My research involves learners over the age of 14. Interviews relate to their general experiences at school, if and how this may be affected by their parent/s incarceration. Questions pertain to their performance in the classroom and relationships with their teachers and peers.

Since this study is of a highly sensitive nature, a registered psychologist will be on hand and is willing to offer counselling if and when the need arises.

I am hereby seeking your permission to study a specific learner schooling at your institution.

I have provided you with a copy of my proposal which includes copies of the research instruments and consent forms to be used in the research process, as well as a copy of the approval letter which I received from the UKZN Ethics Committee and KZN Department of Education.

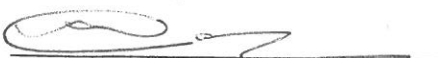
All information will be treated as confidential. All interviews and discussions regarding this study will take place in private and outside the school premises. Anonymity is guaranteed in the sense that no names of learners or participating institutions will be used when the dissertation produced is reviewed by the examiners. As the principal, you may withdraw permission for your learners to participate in this study at any time, without negative consequences.

This study will be conducted under the supervision of Mr Henry Muribwathoho who may be contacted for additional information or confirmation of the above on 031 260 7011 or fax 031 260 7003. I may also be contacted on 082 770 6245.

For confirmation, you may also contact Ms. P. Ximba of the University of Kwazulu Natal Research Office: Ethics at Westville Campus telephonically on 031 260 3587, by fax on 031 260 4609 or email [ximbap@ukzn.ac.za](mailto:ximbap@ukzn.ac.za).

Thank you for your time and consideration.

Yours sincerely,



Miss Nolene Moodley

**PARENT CONSENT FORM****PARENTS / GUARDIAN: PERMISSION TO CONDUCT INTERVIEWS WITH CHILD / WARD**

23 July 2013

Dear Parent / Guardian

This serves to inform you that I, Nolene Moodley, am a bona fide student of the University of Kwazulu Natal, pursuing my Masters Degree in Education. I am currently collecting data for my Master's project entitled, *"Parents behind bars: Investigating the scholastic experiences of learners whose parent/s are incarcerated."* I would appreciate it if you would afford me the space to work with your child / ward on this project. The purpose of the study is to understand if and how the absence of a parent due to incarceration may or may not affect the scholastic experiences of the learners involved. My research involves learners over the age of 14. Interviews relate to their general experiences at school, if and how this may be affected by a parent/s incarceration. Questions pertain to their performance in the classroom and relationships with their teachers and peers.

I request permission to interview your child / ward regarding their experiences at school, if and how it may be affected by their parent's imprisonment. Interviews will take place on a one-on-one basis at each participant's residence or any venue where the learner may feel comfortable. Since this study is of a sensitive nature, a registered psychologist will be on hand and is willing to offer counselling if and when the need arises.

All information will be treated as confidential. Anonymity is guaranteed in the sense that no names of learners, parents or participating institutions will be used when the dissertation produced is reviewed by the examiners. Participation is entirely voluntary and you as the parent / guardian may withdraw your permission for participation at any time, without any negative consequences.

This study will be conducted under the supervision of Mr Henry Muribwathoho who may be contacted for additional information or confirmation of the above on 031 260 7011 or fax 031 260 7003. I may also be contacted on 082 770 6245 or 084 623 7214.

For confirmation, you may also contact Ms. P. Ximba of the University of Kwazulu Natal Research Office: Ethics at Westville Campus telephonically on 031 260 3587, by fax on 031 260 4609 or email [ximbap@ukzn.ac.za](mailto:ximbap@ukzn.ac.za).

*If you permit your child / ward to participate in this project, please sign the acknowledgement slip below.*

**ACKNOWLEDGEMENT SLIP**

I, \_\_\_\_\_, parent / guardian of \_\_\_\_\_ hereby grant / do not grant consent for my child / ward to participate in the above-mentioned study.

SIGNATURE OF PARENT / GUARDIAN

DATE

## ASSENT FORM LEARNER / PARTICIPANT

23 July 2013

Dear Learner

This serves to inform you that I, Nolene Moodley am a student of the University of Kwazulu Natal, studying for my Master of Education degree. I am collecting information for my research project entitled, *"Parents behind bars: Investigating the scholastic experiences of learners whose parent/s are incarcerated,"* and I would like to work with you as part of this project.

The purpose of my study is to collect information on your experiences at school and how it may or may not be affected by having a parent in prison. You will be interviewed for an hour where I will ask you some questions about school and how, if at all, it has been affected by your parent's imprisonment. A registered psychologist will be available to offer counseling, should you need it, during the interview process.

All the information you give to me will be treated as confidential. Anonymity is guaranteed in the sense that your name and other personal information will not be used when the dissertation produced is reviewed by examiners. Your participation in this study is entirely voluntary. You may be a participant only if you wish, and may withdraw from the study at any time.

If you agree to participate in the project, please sign the consent form below.

(Please note: Should you need any additional information or confirmation of the above, please contact my supervisor Mr Henry Muribwathoho on 031 260 7011 or fax 031 260 7003.)

For confirmation, you may also contact Ms. P. Ximba of the University of Kwazulu Natal Research Office: Ethics at Westville Campus telephonically on 031 260 3587, by fax on 031 260 4609 or email [ximbap@ukzn.ac.za](mailto:ximbap@ukzn.ac.za).

**ASSENT FORM**

Please initial box

- |   |                          |
|---|--------------------------|
| 1. I agree to take part in the above study.   | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 2. I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am am free to withdraw at any time, without giving reason.              | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 3. I confirm that I have read and understand the intentions of this study and have had the opportunity to ask questions.              | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 4. I agree to the interview being audio recorded.   | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 5. I am willing to provide material for a Life History study.   | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 6. I agree to the use of anonymised quotes in publications.   | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 7. I have read and understood all the information above and it has been explained in detail to me by the student conducting the study | <input type="checkbox"/> |

.....  
FULL NAME OF PARTICIPANT.....  
DATE.....  
SIGNATURE OF PARTICIPANT.....  
FULL NAME OF PARENT.....  
DATE.....  
SIGNATURE OF PARENT.....  
FULL NAME OF RESEARCHER.....  
DATE.....  
SIGNATURE OF RESEARCHER

## INTERVIEW SCHEDULE

1. What is your name?

---

2. How old are you?

---

3. Who do you live with?

---

4. How many brothers and sisters do you have?

---

5. What are your interests / hobbies?

---

6. Which school do you go to? What grade?

---

7. Do you like school?

---

8. Your mum / dad is in prison. Do you know the reason why?

---

9. Do you understand the reason why he or she is in prison?

---

10. How does this make you feel?

---

11. Do you think their punishment fits the crime?

---

12. How often do you visit him / her?

---

13. What do you talk about?

---

14. How do feel now that you don't see your mum / dad as often as you would like to?

---

15. What do you miss most now that mum /dad is no longer at home?

---

---

16. Since the arrest, how have things at home changed?

---

---

17. How has it affected you at home?

---

18. Before your mum / dad went to prison, who helped you with your homework, and who helps you now?

---

19. Do your friends and teachers at school know that mum / dad is in prison?

---

20. Do you still have the same friends?

---

21. Do you friends treat you any differently once they know of the imprisonment?

---

22. How do their comments / attitudes make you feel?

---

23. How has this affected you at school?

---

24. Has your parent/s imprisonment changed your outlook on life?

---

25. Have you spoken to your teachers about your parent's imprisonment at all?

17. a. If No, why?

17.b. If Yes, Are your teachers supportive and helpful?

---

---

26. How do people usually react when they find out?

---

27. Do you find that you are picked on because of this?

---

28. How do you cope with the teasing?

---

29. Share some of your thoughts on what you think schools can do to be more supportive to children with parents in prison.

---

30. Your parent being in prison, does it make you feel as though you could end up doing the same? Or does it make you more determined to succeed in life?

---

31. What do you desire most in life?

---

32. Is there anything else that you would like to talk about regarding this topic?

---



## LANGUAGE CLEARANCE CERTIFICATE

25 Maple Crescent  
Circle Park  
KLOOF  
3610

Phone 031 – 7075912  
0823757722  
Fax 031 - 7110458  
E-mail:  
wyebanksec@telkomsa.net

**Dr Saths Govender**

---

22 DECEMBER 2013

## LANGUAGE CLEARANCE CERTIFICATE

TO WHOM IT MAY CONCERN

This serves to inform that I have read the final version of the dissertation titled:

**'A PARENT BEHIND BARS: INVESTIGATING THE SCHOLASTIC  
EXPERIENCES OF LEARNERS WHOSE PARENTS ARE INCARCERATED'**  
by N. Moodley.

To the best of my knowledge, all the proposed amendments have been effected and the work is free of spelling and grammatical errors. I am of the view that the quality of language used meets generally accepted academic standards.

Yours faithfully



**DR S. GOVENDER**

B Paed. (Arts), B.A. (Hons), B Ed.  
Cambridge Certificate for English Medium Teachers  
MPA, D Admin.

## TURNITIN REPORT

