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Caregiver Perspectives about Implementing Educational Goals for Children of Incarcerated Parents in a Head Start Program

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This is to certify that the doctoral study by

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Abstract

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MECE, Walden University 2014

BS, Portland State University, 1999

Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Education

Early Childhood Education

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Abstract

The problem addressed in this study is that caregivers of children with incarcerated parents inconsistently implement the mandated educational goals developed through the Head Start program. Grounded in Bowen's family systems theory, the purpose of this qualitative case study was to explore caregiver's perspectives on implementing Head Start Educational goals for children of incarcerated parents and their views on the resources or training needed to support these goals. For this case study, 12 former caregivers from a Head Start program in a women's correctional facility in Oregon were interviewed. Data were collected through semistructured interviews and analyzed thematically with the following themes emerging: Caregivers faced emotional strain, transportation barriers, limited involvement in goal-setting, and insufficient support services. Despite these obstacles, caregivers expressed a deep commitment to supporting the children's development and a desire for clearer guidance and more accessible resources. The implications for positive social change are for Head Start teachers and administrators to enhance caregiver support systems by improving communication, offering targeted training, and facilitating collaboration across caregiving and institutional boundaries. Strengthening these partnerships may improve goal implementation and educational outcomes for children of incarcerated parents.

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Dedication

This project study is lovingly dedicated to my husband, Matthew Stark, and my two daughters, Brooklyn Tummond and Harley Tummond. Your unwavering support, patience, and belief in me have carried me through every step of this journey. I am forever grateful for your love and encouragement.

I also extend my deepest appreciation to Dr. Grace Lappin, whose guidance and steadfast support throughout this process made it possible for me to reach this milestone. I could not have done this without you.

Table of Contents

List of Tables

List of Figures

Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study

Incarceration is associated with a wide range of adverse consequences, such as poor physical and mental health outcomes, difficulties obtaining employment, and socioeconomic hardship (Dargis & Mitchell-Somoza, 2021). Incarceration can also have significant negative effects on the family structure, as parents in the United States make up over half of the incarcerated population. Children experiencing parental incarceration confront numerous additional adversities, including a broad range of family risks (Dargis & Mitchell-Somoza, 2021). Institutional policies often restrict the frequency and quality of contact between incarcerated parents and their children (Copp et al., 2022; Dargis & Mitchell-Somoza, 2021). Exposure to parental incarceration has been linked to anxiety, behavioral challenges, and diminished academic performance in children and adolescents (Luk et al., 2022). Further, with the incarcerated parent largely absent from the educational process, caregiving responsibilities including supporting school readiness typically shift to the caregiver or other parent (Head Start Approach to School Readiness, 2022).

This qualitative study was conducted at Oregon's only women's correctional facility, where a Head Start program operates onsite to serve incarcerated mothers and their children. The program allows eight mother–child pairs to participate in classroom activities together within the prison. Caregivers from the community are responsible for transporting the children to the facility and supporting their learning at home. Within Head Start, educational goals are collaboratively developed by the teacher, the incarcerated mother, and the caregiver. However, the caregiver typically assumes the

primary responsibility for implementing and reinforcing these goals in the home environment.

The study aimed to identify the barriers these caregivers encounter and examine instructional practices that may enhance their ability to support Head Start educational objectives. This chapter presents findings that explore how caregivers experienced and navigated the implementation of these mandated goals, with particular attention to the barriers and inconsistencies that shaped their involvement. This chapter also introduces two research questions that guide the inquiry. In addition, it presents the study's background and conceptual framework, which is informed by Bowen's family systems theory (Kerr & Bowen, 1988). The chapter also outlines the nature of the study and defines key terms, assumptions, scope, and delimitations.

Background

This portion outlines the Head Start requirements for children and families enrolled in the program, particularly as they pertain to educational goal setting. In Head Start, educational goals are developed collaboratively between the teacher and the child's parent. When the parent is unavailable, such as in cases of incarceration, the child's primary caregiver assumes this role. At the Head Start program located within the correctional facility, the incarcerated parent participates in classroom activities and contributes to goal setting in coordination with the teacher and the caregiver.

This study focused on caregivers because they provide consistent daily support to the child and are responsible for implementing educational goals at home. According to the Head Start Program Performance Standards (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2022), all programs are required to establish school readiness goals that reflect

expectations for children's progress across key developmental domains. These five central domains include: (a) language and literacy development, (b) cognition and general knowledge such as early math and science, (c) approaches to learning, (d) physical well-being and motor development, and (e) social-emotional development. Head Start teachers are required to align curriculum and assessments with these domains and tailor goals to the developmental stage of each enrolled child. Parents are expected to participate in this process, contributing to goal development based on classroom observations and home experiences. When a parent is incarcerated, the caregiver assumes this collaborative role with the teacher to support the child's learning both in and out of the classroom.

Problem Statement

The problem addressed in this study is that caregivers of children with incarcerated parents inconsistently implement the mandated educational goals developed through the Head Start program. At the women's correctional facility in Oregon, incarcerated mothers participate in a Head Start program where they collaborate with caregivers and teachers to create individualized educational goals for their children. The children attend classes with their mothers on Tuesdays and Thursdays from 9:30 a.m. to 12:00 p.m. year-round. While the incarcerated parent and teacher support goal implementation during in-class sessions, the child's caregiver is responsible for reinforcing these goals at home. Teachers document the development and progress of these goals using ChildPlus software, which generates reports tracking goal completion across families. According to ChildPlus data, although caregivers are involved in setting these educational goals, many are unable to follow through with implementation and mark them as complete. This issue is particularly significant in cases where families are

involved with the child welfare system and the incarcerated parent retains custody, as such families may be prioritized for enrollment in Head Start due to elevated needs (Head Start Child and Welfare Partnership, 2020). Despite this prioritization and collaborative planning, a family advocate noted that caregivers often struggle to make progress toward established educational goals, highlighting a critical implementation gap.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this study was to explore caregiver's perspectives on implementing Head Start educational goals for children of incarcerated parents and their views on resources or training needed to support these goals. This project addresses a gap in practice related to the inconsistent implementation of Head Start educational goals by caregivers who play a central role in supporting the child's development during the parent's incarceration. Head Start requires the creation of individualized educational goals for each child, which may include objectives such as printing their name or recognizing a specific number of alphabet letters. Gaining a deeper understanding of caregivers' experiences in supporting these goals can inform future efforts to develop targeted resources and support systems tailored to the needs of this unique caregiver population.

Research Questions

In my research, I explored the perspective of caregivers of children of incarcerated parents about implementing mandated Head Start educational goals. I answered the following research questions:

Research Question 1: What is the perspective of caregivers of children of incarcerated parents regarding the implementation of the mandated Head Start educational goals?

Research Question 2: What is the perspective of caregivers about the training or resources needed to meet established goals?

Conceptual Framework

The theoretical framework guiding this basic qualitative study is family systems theory (Kerr & Bowen, 1988). Bowen's family systems theory emphasizes the interconnectedness of individuals within a family unit. When one member of the family experiences stress, the entire system is affected, leading to shifts in relationships and family dynamics (Tadros & Presley, 2022). In cases of parental incarceration, this disruption extends to all family members, often resulting in someone other than the incarcerated parent assuming the primary caregiving role.

Research has shown that families of incarcerated individuals often experience profound financial hardships and long-term economic instability due to the sudden loss of income and increased household expenses. When a parent is incarcerated, the remaining caregiver or co-parent not only assumes full financial responsibility for the household but also frequently absorbs the added costs associated with maintaining contact with the incarcerated parent. These costs can include phone calls, travel for prison visitation, legal fees, and the purchase of necessities for the incarcerated individual. Additionally, many of these families were already experiencing economic challenges prior to incarceration, such as underemployment, housing instability, or reliance on public assistance. The compounding effect of incarceration deepens the cycle of poverty and limits

opportunities for upward mobility. Caregivers may also face limited access to childcare, reduced work hours, or job loss as a result of their new caregiving responsibilities. These financial strains can impact the caregiver's ability to engage fully in their child's early education and to implement Head Start educational goals effectively, further widening educational disparities for children of incarcerated parents (Rubenstein et al., 2019).

Families with incarcerated parents often face ongoing disruption due to the cyclical nature of incarceration (Tadros et al., 2021). Family systems theory explains that to understand the behavior and experiences of individuals; one must consider their relationships within the broader family context. This perspective is especially pertinent when incarcerated individuals are disproportionately blamed for familial issues, often without recognizing the systemic challenges they face (Tadros et al., 2021).

It is necessary for families impacted by incarceration to renegotiate household roles and establish new co-parenting dynamics (Tadros & Presley, 2022). Understanding the complexity of co-parenting in these circumstances requires empirical inquiry that acknowledges the lived experiences of incarcerated parents' voices that are often marginalized due to societal stigma. Parental incarceration is frequently intertwined with longstanding social disadvantages that begin in early life and continue through involvement with the legal and criminal justice systems (Giordano et al., 2019). Families supporting incarcerated individuals often encounter barriers to communication and stigma, both of which can further strain parenting and co-parenting relationships.

Stigma related to incarceration can significantly limit access to social support, thereby intensifying stress within the family unit and disrupting collaborative caregiving efforts (Tadros et al., 2021). The incarceration of a parent can therefore have far-reaching

consequences, including the need to redefine co-parenting roles and responsibilities. Caregivers and incarcerated parents must negotiate how they will share responsibilities, set rules, and contribute to their child's development (Tadros & Ogden, 2020). Within the context of the Head Start program, caregivers play a vital role in supporting both the child and the incarcerated parent by fulfilling essential responsibilities, such as completing required documentation and participating in goal-setting processes.

Nature of the Study

This study employed a basic qualitative design to explore the perspectives of caregivers of children of incarcerated parents regarding the implementation of mandated educational goals in a Head Start program. A qualitative approach is especially appropriate for this inquiry because it prioritizes understanding the individuals' experiences, interactions, and challenges within their unique contexts (Aspers & Corte, 2019). In this case, the lived realities of caregivers, many of whom are managing complex family dynamics, emotional strain, and limited resources, required a methodology that can capture depth, nuance, and variability. Basic qualitative research allows the researcher to gather rich, descriptive data through open-ended interviews and thematic analysis, enabling an in-depth exploration of how caregivers interpret, respond to, and act upon the educational goals established in partnership with the program and the incarcerated parent. This design also aligns well with the study's intent to inform future practice and policy by grounding findings in the voices of those directly involved in the caregiving process. As Tenny et al. (2022) emphasized, qualitative research is particularly suited to gaining insight into real-world issues by eliciting detailed,

contextualized narratives that uncover patterns and meanings often overlooked in quantitative designs.

The Head Start program, located at a women's correctional facility in Oregon, operates year-round, offering classes every Tuesday and Thursday for 3.5 hours. To be eligible for the program, incarcerated women had to reside in the facility's minimum-security unit and have fewer than 5 years remaining on their sentence. Eligibility was determined by a prison counselor based on the nature of the individual's offense. Caregivers who may be the child's other parent, a relative, or a legal guardian are responsible for transporting the child to the facility for participation in the program. In cases where the Department of Human Services holds custody, they may arrange transportation for the child.

In this qualitative study, I conducted interviews with 12 former caregivers affiliated with the target correctional facility. These interviews explored caregivers' perspectives on implementing the educational goals they helped develop through collaboration with Head Start staff and the incarcerated parent. This approach provided a platform for participants to share their experiences in their own words, offering rich and meaningful insights (Roberts, 2020).

Purposeful sampling was used to recruit participants who possess direct, relevant experience supporting the educational development of children whose parents are incarcerated and have participated in the target Head Start program. This sampling method ensures that the individuals selected can offer rich, detailed insights into the phenomenon being studied. Participants were identified based on specific inclusion criteria that align with the study's focus, such as being the primary caregiver of a child of

an incarcerated parent and having experience with the Head Start program on educational goal setting and implementation.

Following data collection, qualitative data were analyzed using thematic analysis, a flexible and widely used method for identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns within qualitative data. The analysis process began with initial coding, in which interview transcripts are carefully reviewed and segmented into meaningful units of information. These codes represent recurring concepts, phrases, and ideas that emerge from the participants' narratives. Once initial codes were established, they were grouped into broader categories and refined into overarching themes that capture the essence of caregivers' experiences, challenges, and needs.

These themes were interpreted in relation to the study's conceptual framework and used to directly address the research questions outlined in Chapter 2. Thematic analysis facilitated a deep understanding of implementing Head Start educational goals in the context of parental incarceration, while also informing future recommendations for program support, policy development, and caregiver engagement strategies.

Definitions

Caregiver: In the context of this study, a caregiver refers to either the child's other biological parent or another adult who assumes primary responsibility for the child's care during the mother's incarceration. Caregivers play a critical role in providing daily support, emotional guidance, and maintaining communication between the child and the incarcerated mother (Lewis et al., 2016).

Correctional facility: Correctional facilities encompass institutions such as prisons and jails. Prisons are state or federally operated institutions that house individuals

convicted of felonies, typically serving sentences longer than one year. In contrast, jails are locally managed by law enforcement and generally detain individuals serving shorter sentences (usually less than 1 year) or those awaiting trial (Correctional Facilities, n.d.).

Early childhood programs: Early childhood programs are designed to enhance developmental and educational outcomes for young children and support their families. These programs typically offer services such as developmental screenings, early education and care, health assessments, and referrals to community resources (Office of Head Start; Child Welfare Information Gateway, n.d.).

Incarcerated: The term "incarcerated" refers to individuals who are confined within a correctional facility, separated from their home environment and the broader community (Eades, 2019).

Head Start: Head Start is a federally funded early childhood program serving preschool-aged children (ages 3 to 5) from low-income families. The program's goal is to prepare children for academic success by providing comprehensive early learning experiences. Head Start is operated by local nonprofit organizations and is available in nearly every county in the United States (Head Start, n.d.).

Assumptions

This study operated under the assumption that caregivers of children of incarcerated parents would provide honest and reliable responses during interviews. It was also assumed that Head Start educators would accurately share their perspectives on the development and implementation of family goals within the program. Given that the purpose was to explore caregiver's perspectives on implementing Head Start educational goals for children of incarcerated parents and their views on resources or training needed

to support these goals the authenticity and accuracy of participant responses was vital. These responses constitute the core data for analysis, making their trustworthiness essential to the credibility of the study's findings. Since the research sought to capture and interpret the lived experiences of caregivers, it is crucial that their input genuinely reflects their views to ensure that the results align with the research questions and present a faithful representation of their perspectives.

Scope and Delimitations

The scope of this study was limited to center-based Head Start classrooms located within a correctional facility in Oregon that serves children of incarcerated mothers. The study focused on the perspectives of caregivers of these children. However, current caregivers actively participating in the Head Start program at the correctional facility were excluded from the study. Instead, the participants were former caregivers who were previously involved in the program, specifically those whose children have either aged out of the program or whose incarcerated parent has been released on parole.

This study aimed to explore the perspectives of former caregivers regarding the implementation of mandated Head Start educational goals. Findings from this research may inform stakeholders about the potential need for additional resources and support systems to assist caregivers in achieving these goals. Within the program, the incarcerated mother collaborates with Head Start educators to develop individualized educational goals for the child. These goals are supported in the classroom by both the mother and the teacher, and in the home environment by the caregiver.

Summary

Currently, approximately 2 million individuals are incarcerated in the United States a 500% increase over the past four decades and a significant portion of this population includes mothers (Ghandnoosh, 2022). More than 25% of children with an incarcerated parent are being raised in non-parental caregiving arrangements (Jackson et al., 2021). This study focuses on exploring the perspectives of caregivers of children of incarcerated parents in relation to two primary research questions:

- RQ 1: What are the perspectives of caregivers of children of incarcerated parents regarding the implementation of the mandated Head Start educational goals?
- RQ 2: What are the perspectives of caregivers about the training or resources needed to meet these established goals?

This chapter provided an overview of the study, which investigates caregivers' experiences with implementing mandated Head Start educational goals for children of incarcerated parents. The chapter began with background information, followed by the problem statement, purpose of the study, research questions, and the nature of the research. It concluded with definitions of key terms, as well as a discussion of the study's assumptions, scope, and delimitations.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Chapter 2 provides a comprehensive review of the literature relevant to this study, including the search strategies employed, the theoretical and conceptual frameworks guiding the research, and an exploration of the roles and challenges faced by caregivers and children of incarcerated parents. Head Start programs collaborate with the child's

primary caregiver to set educational goals designed to support early development and school readiness (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2022). The *Family Goal-Setting Guide* highlights the importance of this collaborative process and how it shapes family relationships (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2022).

This study aimed to investigate the perspectives of caregivers of children of incarcerated parents regarding the implementation of mandated educational goals in Head Start programs. While the number of women incarcerated in the United States has increased dramatically over the past several decades, there remains a notable gap in research addressing the experiences of caregivers responsible for supporting children during parental incarceration (The Sentencing Project, 2021). For many caregivers, assuming the role of primary adult figure can be both sudden and burdensome, particularly as they are tasked with supporting the child's education and emotional well-being.

Over the past 40 years, the United States has experienced a 222% increase in incarceration rates (The Sentencing Project, 2021), which has led to a corresponding rise in the number of children placed in non-parental care arrangements. More than one-quarter of these children are cared for exclusively by non-parent caregivers (Jackson et al., 2021). Despite this growing trend, limited research exists on how these caregivers perceive and implement educational goals, particularly within Head Start programs that serve incarcerated mothers and their children.

The current study was designed to examine the Head Start educational goals developed in collaboration with caregivers, which are often not fully implemented due to various barriers. To support this inquiry, multiple search strategies were used to locate

current, peer-reviewed literature on the direct and indirect impacts of parental incarceration on caregivers. The purpose of this study was to explore caregiver's perspectives on implementing Head Start educational goals for children of incarcerated parents and their views on resources or training needed to support these goals This chapter presents the study's conceptual and theoretical framework, guided by Bowen's family systems theory (Kerr & Bowen, 1988), which emphasizes the interconnected roles within families affected by incarceration. It then provides a historical overview of incarceration in the United States, highlighting its impact on low-income and marginalized communities. The literature review also covers family intervention practices, including kinship care, mental health services, and the Head Start partnership model, with a focus on programs operating in correctional settings. The chapter concludes by identifying a gap in the literature specifically, the lack of research on caregiver perspectives in implementing Head Start educational goals for children of incarcerated parents establishing the significance of this study.

Literature Search

I searched for literature from the resources at Walden University Library. I used ERIC, EKLC, Google Scholar. Search terms included *early childhood education, Head Start, children of incarcerated parents, caregivers of children of incarcerated parents, Head Start educational goals, Head Start performance standards, child educational goals, family goals, school readiness, assessment, curriculum, parent family and community engagement framework, school and children of incarcerated parents,* and *early childhood education incarcerated mothers.* The articles were primarily published in peer-reviewed scholarly journals, books, and dissertations.

Conceptual Framework

This qualitative study was guided by Bowen's family systems theory (Kerr & Bowen, 1988), which emphasizes the emotional interdependence of family members. According to this framework, when one member of the family experiences a significant stressor such as parental incarceration, the effects ripple through the entire system, influencing roles, relationships, and patterns of communication. Incarceration can disrupt family functioning by altering caregiving responsibilities and emotional bonds. Family systems theory provides a lens for understanding how families adapt to such disruptions by examining their interactions, cultural norms, and coping behaviors (Karakurt & Silver, 2014).

Bowen conceptualized the family as an emotional system composed of interdependent relationships influenced by biological, psychological, and sociological processes. Supportive and stable family relationships are viewed as critical to individual and collective well-being (Kerr & Bowen, 1988). When a parent is incarcerated, the family system often experiences strain, particularly in terms of role clarity and decision-making. Caregivers and other family members may struggle to navigate their responsibilities and maintain cohesion within the altered family structure (Turney & Halpern, 2021). Moreover, the broader social environment or social ecology of the family can serve as a compounding stressor, affecting the emotional and functional stability of all members (Dennison et al., 2020).

Rate of Incarceration in the United States

The United States has the highest incarceration rate in the world, a trend that has remained steady in proportion to population growth (Morgan et al., 2021). Approximately

5 million children in the United States have experienced the incarceration of a parent at some point in their lives (Correa et al., 2020). The impacts of mass incarceration extend far beyond the individual who is incarcerated, creating significant collateral consequences for their families and communities (Kajeepeta et al., 2020). Several states including New York, Ohio, Tennessee, and Minnesota have estimated the proportion of incarcerated individuals who are parents, with findings indicating that between 54% and 72% of men and 61% to 85% of women in these systems have minor children (Shlafer et al., 2019). Despite these numbers, the needs of incarcerated parents and their children have been historically overlooked. Research has consistently shown a strong correlation between incarceration and membership in historically underserved and marginalized populations. Individuals in these groups are more likely to have lower educational attainment, limited income, histories of psychiatric treatment, and substance use disorders (Burkholder et al., 2020).

Family Intervention: Kinship Caregivers

As incarceration rates have risen in the United States, there has been a corresponding increase in shared caregiving arrangements and the number of children living with non-nuclear family members (Jackson et al., 2021). Incarceration has wide-ranging effects not only on the incarcerated individual but also on families and caregivers, who often face a range of challenges including mental health concerns, increased risk of suicide, homelessness, and financial strain (Axelson et al., 2020).

Caregivers who assume legal custody of children during a parent's incarceration often commit to long-term or permanent placements. However, financial hardship remains one of the most frequently reported challenges, with only 37% of caregivers

receiving government assistance (Koh et al., 2022). Additional concerns include managing the child's medical and mental health needs, as well as arranging adequate childcare. Caregivers describe the emotional and logistical complexity of their roles, often striving to do what they can despite limited resources. As relational, situational, and emotional demands accumulate, chaos and stress increase resulting in what Linden and Tompkins (2020) describe as "compounding complexity" that requires survival-focused decision-making.

Researchers have linked poor outcomes among children affected by parental incarceration to concentrated disadvantage, material hardship, and the absence of stable, high-quality parenting often due to the elevated stress levels of caregivers (Arditti & Johnson, 2020). Kinship caregivers, in particular, frequently step into caregiving roles with little preparation, often under emergency conditions. They commonly experience high levels of psychological and physical stress, low income, housing instability, and elevated rates of depression (Cavanaugh, 2019; Wu et al., 2022).

Despite these challenges, caregivers and educators can play a vital role in supporting children's emotional development by fostering secure, nurturing environments. Strategies such as consistent and sensitive caregiving, spending quality time together, and promoting positive relational experiences can help strengthen bonds with children. Providing educational resources and community-based support may also alleviate caregiver stress and promote healthier attachment outcomes, especially in impoverished communities (Carotta et al., 2022).

Furthermore, caregivers' mental health must be considered in relation to the adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) of the children in their care, including emotional

abuse, neglect, and behavioral issues. These cumulative stressors can place a significant emotional and psychological burden on caregivers, particularly when they lack access to adequate mental health services or social support networks. Xu et al. (2022) emphasized the importance of addressing both caregiver and child needs in kinship care settings to improve long-term outcomes and provide effective, trauma-informed support. By prioritizing caregiver well-being alongside the needs of children, service providers and early childhood programs like Head Start can foster more stable, nurturing environments that enhance developmental outcomes and resilience.

Incarceration and Children's Education

Children with incarcerated parents represent a particularly vulnerable population whose psychological, emotional, and social needs often go unmet (Arrastia-Chisholm et al., 2020). Early intervention is crucial, and educational systems play a central role in identifying and addressing these needs. Educators frequently assess cognitive functioning when determining school readiness; however, both cognitive and non-cognitive development are critical components in evaluating a child's preparedness for academic success. School readiness has been strongly linked to future academic achievement, making it a foundational element of early education (Stergas, 2020).

Developmental delays are often first identified upon a child's entry into early childhood education settings. Research suggests that these delays can moderate the relationship between behavior problems and the level of supportive parenting provided. Supportive parental interactions may serve a protective function, especially when combined with targeted developmental interventions for children facing such delays (Diemer & Gerstein, 2020). Parental incarceration is one such factor that may influence

long-term educational outcomes, and a deeper understanding of its impact could provide insights into the educational trajectories of affected children as they transition into adulthood (Stergas, 2020).

Studies indicate that stressed caregivers and the lack of consistent, high-quality parenting are contributing factors to negative developmental outcomes in children of incarcerated parents (Arditti & Johnson, 2022). Given that children spend a significant portion of their day in school, educators are uniquely positioned to provide support, recognize signs of distress, and offer resources to children currently experiencing or having previously experienced parental incarceration (Turney, 2019). Research further highlights the emotional toll of incarceration on mothers, who often express grief over missing key milestones and everyday interactions such as hugging, nurturing, and actively participating in their child's academic and emotional development (Milavetz et al., 2021).

Despite the large number of children impacted by parental incarceration, they remain largely invisible in formal early childhood education (ECE) policies and programming. Many of these families fall into low-income categories, making it likely that their children are enrolled in state or federally funded preschool programs. These early education programs, including Head Start, have the potential to provide essential support and improve developmental and academic outcomes for children of incarcerated parents (Dichter et al., 2020).

The following section will explore the specific role of Head Start in supporting families affected by incarceration and in promoting school readiness for children navigating the challenges of parental absence due to incarceration. Head Start programs

are uniquely positioned to serve as a stabilizing force by offering comprehensive services that address not only educational needs but also social-emotional development and family engagement. These programs often act as critical access points to community resources, helping caregivers manage the compounded stressors associated with incarceration while fostering continuity and connection in the child's early learning experiences.

Parental Incarceration and Head Start

Founded in 1965 as part of the War on Poverty, Head Start is the first and largest federally funded early childhood education program, enrolling roughly 900,000 low-income children and their families as of FY 2017 (Gonzalez, 2020). Head Start follows the definition of a homeless child in the McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act. If a child is living with non-parent relatives due to loss of housing, economic hardship, or a similar reason, the child may meet this definition of a homeless child. A child experiencing homelessness is eligible for Head Start (Head Start Policy and Regulations, 2018). Some examples of circumstances leading a child to kinship care include economic hardship, substance misuse, or incarceration. If the child is living with non-parent relatives for these or similar reasons, the child may be considered homeless and then would be eligible for Head Start. (Head Start Policy and Regulations, 2018). Once a family experiences incarceration, additional risks can accrue and compound, including a reduction in family income, increased stress on the non-incarcerated caregiver, and stigma (Dichter et. al., 2020).

The growing availability of alternatives to Head Start highlights the importance of understanding the influence of Head Start on the behaviors and outcomes of participating children and their families (Gonzalez, K. E. (2020). This includes educating parents and

caregivers on the support Head Start gives to the entire family. Research has shown parental involvement in the Head Start program has declined from 1997 to 2009. Parents reported less engagement in a critical period that witnessed heightened investment in children and families (Ansari & Markowitz, 2021). Strong partnerships between the family and the educator can support the goals set in the family partnership process (*The Family Partnership Process: Engaging and goal setting with families*, 2021).

It is essential to ensure that families are engaged, and needs are discussed as part of the enrollment and orientation process. Child goals are set with the primary caregiver, and this effort could include probing family circumstances, including parental absence due to incarceration. To do this well, programs could also provide professional development support to ensure that professionals working in these settings are well-equipped to conduct these interviews in an equitable and respectful manner (Dichter et al., 2020). Research has shown the support Head Start has for health, education, and social services would extend to the family outside of the prison walls. The Head Start model integrates comprehensive services to benefit the whole family (Krings & Pace, 2020).

In the next section, I will discuss how Kindergarten Readiness is an important part of Head Start. Setting the educational goal with the primary parent or caregiver validates them as the first educator of the child as they will also be supporting the child at home. This collaborative approach not only fosters a sense of empowerment among caregivers but also strengthens the bridge between home and school environments. By involving families in the goal-setting process, Head Start reinforces shared responsibility and

encourages consistent reinforcement of developmental skills both in the classroom and in daily life at home.

Head Start and Kindergarten Readiness

Established in 1965 as part of the War on Poverty, Head Start remains the largest federally funded early childhood education initiative in the United States, serving approximately 900,000 low-income children and their families as of fiscal year 2017 (Gonzalez, 2020). In accordance with the McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act, Head Start programs include children living in non-parental care arrangements such as with relatives due to circumstances like economic hardship, housing instability, substance misuse, or parental incarceration. In these cases, the child may be classified as homeless and therefore eligible for enrollment in Head Start services (Head Start Policy and Regulations, 2018).

Incarceration introduces a host of additional risks for families, including reduced household income, increased emotional and logistical strain on the non-incarcerated caregiver, and the stigma associated with justice system involvement (Dichter et al., 2020). These challenges further reinforce the importance of early childhood programs such as Head Start, which provide comprehensive support to both children and families facing adversity.

The increasing availability of alternative early childhood programs underscores the need to examine the unique influence Head Start has on participating children and families (Gonzalez, 2020). A central component of the Head Start model is family engagement, including caregiver education and support services. However, research shows that parental involvement in Head Start declined significantly between 1997 and

2009, a period that coincided with increased public investment in early childhood education (Ansari & Markowitz, 2021). Strong partnerships between families and educators are critical to achieving the goals established through the Family Partnership Process, a key mechanism for aligning educational strategies with family needs and values (The Family Partnership Process: Engaging and Goal Setting with Families, 2021).

Ensuring that families are meaningfully engaged from the outset, including during enrollment and orientation, is essential. This process involves setting individualized child goals in collaboration with the primary caregiver. It also presents an opportunity to discuss family dynamics, including the absence of a parent due to incarceration. To conduct such conversations equitably and respectfully, Head Start programs must invest in professional development that prepares staff to approach these topics with cultural sensitivity and trauma-informed practices (Dichter et al., 2020).

Head Start's comprehensive model integrates health, education, and social services that extend beyond the classroom to support families holistically even when a parent is incarcerated (Krings & Pace, 2020). These wraparound services position Head Start to be a vital resource for families navigating the challenges of incarceration. The program's ability to coordinate with community partners, provide mental health referrals, and offer consistent developmental assessments ensures that both children and caregivers receive the support they need. In cases where a parent is incarcerated, Head Start staff often serve as a bridge between the correctional facility, the caregiver, and the child, helping to maintain continuity in both education and emotional support.

The following section will focus on the role of kindergarten readiness within the Head Start model. Setting educational goals with the child's primary caregiver acknowledges their role as the child's first teacher and reinforces their importance in supporting learning and development at home. This collaborative goal-setting process not only empowers caregivers but also strengthens the home-school connection, which is essential for sustained educational progress. By involving caregivers in early goal development, Head Start helps build caregiver confidence and promotes consistency in learning strategies across both classroom and home environments.

Family Engagement

Family engagement has become a central focus in most early childhood education programs. However, research indicates that families from low-income and ethnically minoritized backgrounds are significantly less likely to participate in engagement activities compared to higher-income white families (Li et al., 2021). Primary caregivers such as parents, grandparents, and other relatives often face substantial barriers to involvement, including lack of transportation, inflexible work schedules, and limited access to childcare. These challenges are further compounded when a parent is incarcerated, adding another layer of complexity to family participation in school-related activities. To effectively support these families, it is essential to understand family engagement within the broader context of societal, cultural, and structural inequities that disproportionately impact families living outside of dominant cultural norms.

Strong home to school communication is key to fostering understanding and trust between educators and families from ethnically and economically marginalized backgrounds. Such communication offers teachers an opportunity to challenge any

preconceived notions or biases about low-income families and allows them to develop culturally responsive strategies to support students and their caregivers (McWayne et al., 2019). Social and emotional development in early childhood continues to be a major focus across disciplines, with a growing emphasis on the role of caregiver interaction. Research has consistently shown that positive parenting and supportive caregiving behaviors serve as protective factors throughout a child's development. These influences are particularly critical for children from high-risk groups, including those from socioeconomically disadvantaged backgrounds, underrepresented racial and ethnic communities, families affected by mental health issues, and single-parent households (Lee & Kreutzer, 2021).

Early interventions have been shown to produce long-term positive outcomes for high-risk populations and can inform children's future educational trajectories (Watts et al., 2020). As part of the Head Start program, home visits with caregivers or parents are designed to strengthen the partnership between families and educational staff. These visits offer an opportunity to collaboratively set goals and support family well-being. However, the success of these home visits depends significantly on the quality of the relationship between the home visitor and the caregiver. Research has identified several factors that influence engagement in home visiting programs, including characteristics of the parent, the visitor, and the structure of the program itself (Shanti, 2020).

Many Early Head Start home visitors are trained primarily in early childhood education and may lack preparation in working with the whole family system. When program outcomes fall short, the responsibility is often placed on families, rather than addressing the institutional or ideological frameworks that may perpetuate inequities

(Crosnoe, 2020). Educators and service providers must therefore be mindful not to make assumptions or assign blame but instead work to understand and address the broader barriers affecting family engagement.

Adverse Childhood Experiences

Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) are potentially traumatic events that can have long-lasting effects on a child's health and development. Research indicates that approximately one in two children in the United States has experienced at least one ACE (Miccoli et al., 2022). Early exposure to ACEs disrupts the development of the body's stress regulation system, which can contribute to social-emotional difficulties and hinder a child's ability to adjust successfully to school environments (Sanders et al., 2020). Common ACEs include parental substance use, depression, neglectful caregiving, exposure to family violence, and various household risk factors (Miccoli et al., 2022).

Incorporating an understanding of ACEs into Head Start programming can offer critical insights into the types of support necessary for improving developmental outcomes in children experiencing poverty. Applying a trauma-informed lens allows educators and service providers to better address the underlying needs of children affected by early adversity (Lee & Malarkey, 2022). Recognizing the impact of trauma on behavior and learning helps staff tailor interventions that are sensitive to the emotional and psychological challenges these children face. Additionally, integrating trauma-informed practices can foster stronger caregiver-child relationships and create more stable, nurturing environments both in the classroom and at home.

Residential instability, including frequent moves, can further exacerbate developmental risks among low-income children. Such instability often disrupts routines,

interrupts educational continuity, and limits access to consistent healthcare and support services. Stable participation in high-quality early childhood education programs, such as Head Start, can serve as a protective factor, offering a consistent and nurturing environment during otherwise turbulent life circumstances (Anastasio et al., 2022). The structured support and secure relationships formed within Head Start classrooms can buffer the negative effects of instability, promoting resilience and developmental progress despite external challenges.

Head Start was founded as a comprehensive "dual generation" program designed to support both the developmental needs of young children and the social service needs of their parents or caregivers (Palmer Molina et al., 2020). Given that ACEs are prevalent among children in poverty, it is essential that early intervention programs integrate trauma-informed practices and provide accessible classroom-based supports. To achieve this, educators must receive targeted training and ongoing professional development to effectively recognize and respond to the needs of children exposed to early adversity (Sanders et al., 2020).

Summary and Conclusion

In Chapter 2, I presented a comprehensive review of the current literature related to incarceration in the United States and its impact on families and early childhood education. The review covered key areas including family intervention and kinship care, the effects of incarceration on children's educational experiences, parental incarceration within the Head Start program, family engagement, and adverse childhood experiences (ACEs). The literature emphasized the critical role of caregivers and family involvement in supporting children's development and school readiness. Understanding the

perspectives of all stakeholders involved in a child's educational journey, particularly caregivers, may enhance family engagement in Head Start and contribute to the successful completion of educational goals.

This next section will outline the research methodology, describe the study design, and address ethical considerations relevant to the implementation of this qualitative study. This chapter will detail the rationale for using a basic qualitative approach and explain how it aligns with the research questions and goals of the study. It will also include descriptions of the participant recruitment process, sampling strategy, data collection procedures, and analytic methods used for identifying themes. Special attention will be given to maintaining ethical standards, including confidentiality and informed consent. Additionally, the chapter will describe strategies for ensuring the credibility, dependability, and trustworthiness of the findings.

Chapter 3: Research Method

The purpose of this study was to explore caregiver's perspectives on implementing Head Start educational goals for children of incarcerated parents and their views on resources or training needed to support these goals. Persistent questions remain about why caregivers are sometimes unable to follow through with the educational objectives developed in collaboration with Head Start staff (Teaching Strategies, 2015). This highlights the need for further research specifically focused on the experiences of caregivers who inconsistently implement the mandated educational goals they help establish. A deeper understanding of these caregivers' experiences could offer valuable insights into the barriers they face and inform strategies to support their role in the educational process.

In this chapter, I present the research methodology employed in this study. This includes an explanation of the selected research design and rationale, the participant recruitment and selection process, and the procedures for data collection and analysis. Additionally, I outline (a) the research design and rationale, (b) the role of the researcher, (c) the methodology, and (d) the strategies used to ensure trustworthiness and maintain ethical standards throughout the study.

Research Design and Rationale

The problem that prompted the idea for this study was that caregivers of children with incarcerated parents inconsistently implement the mandated educational goals developed through the Head Start program. A deeper understanding of the caregivers' experiences supporting the educational goals of the children they are caring for while the parent is incarcerated would be beneficial because it could inform efforts to help create needed resources for this population. In my research, I explored the perspective of caregivers of children of incarcerated parents about implementing mandated Head Start educational goals. The following research questions guided my study:

- RQ 1: What is the perspective of caregivers of children of incarcerated parents regarding the implementation of the mandated Head Start educational goals?
- RQ 2: What is the perspective of caregivers about the training or resources needed to meet established goals?

I used a basic qualitative design for this study. Qualitative research involves studying and collecting insight which includes firsthand experiences from an individual's life. Interviews give insight and describe routine and problematic moments and meanings in individuals' lives (Aspers & Corte, 2019). Basic qualitative research gives a way to

explain thoughts, interactions, opinions, and actions (Merriam & Grenier, 2019). Furthermore, qualitative research is an inductive process that provides the opportunity to understand the meaning that participants construct of experiences allows the researcher to build concepts based on the data gained from participants as they relate to the phenomenon (Merriam & Grenier, 2019)

I chose a basic qualitative study with interviews because data from interviews provides an opportunity to capture rich, detailed, and descriptive data true to study participants' responses. For this study, this method is more appropriate as the interview process captures how and why caregivers struggle to implement the Head Start child educational goals they helped create. Researchers who use the basic qualitative method seek to understand the perspectives of a group of people by collecting detailed but descriptive data (Creswell, 2017). This basic qualitative study approach aligns with this study's purpose to explore caregiver's perspectives on implementing Head Start educational goals for children of incarcerated parents and their views on resources or training needed to support these goals

Role of the Researcher

As the researcher in this basic qualitative study, my goal was to understand and document the perspectives of caregivers of children of incarcerated parents regarding the development and implementation of educational goals within the Head Start program. To obtain authentic, in-depth responses, I worked to establish rapport and build trust with participants, ensuring they feel comfortable and secure during the interview process. Creating a safe and respectful environment is essential for eliciting open, honest insights.

To promote transparency and ethical engagement, I began each interview by briefly sharing my educational and professional background, clearly outlining my role in the study, and explaining its purpose and potential implications. I also described how the data would be used. Maintaining professionalism throughout the data collection process, I ensured all responses are recorded accurately and interpreted objectively, free from personal bias.

To establish the trustworthiness of this qualitative research, I adhered to the established criteria of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Byram, 2022). This includes maintaining detailed and organized documentation throughout the study to minimize error and enhance transparency. I reported all findings regardless of whether they appear significant and openly discuss the limitations of the study. Recognizing and reflecting on my own potential biases was an ongoing part of the research process, aligning with recommendations on reflexivity in qualitative inquiry (Johnson et al., 2019).

I bring to this study 15 years of professional experience working in Head Start programs, having held positions including teacher aide, teacher, program area supervisor, and currently, early childhood program manager. In my current role, I oversee the Head Start program at a women's correctional facility in Oregon. While I have extensive experience in Head Start education, I have no direct affiliation with any of the former caregivers participating in this study. Additionally, my past working relationships with administrators, educators, and families in Head Start did not influence the analysis or interpretation of the data. I was committed to conducting this study with integrity, neutrality, and respect for the participants' lived experiences.

Methodology

The setting for this basic qualitative study was a Head Start program serving children from birth to age 5, located within a women's correctional facility in Oregon. This program provides early childhood education and comprehensive support services to incarcerated mothers and their children. The purpose of the study was to explore caregiver's perspectives on implementing Head Start educational goals for children of incarcerated parents and their views on resources or training needed to support these goals. Caregivers are defined as individuals who assumed primary caregiving roles for children of incarcerated parents regarding their experiences with setting and implementing Head Start educational goals.

Qualitative research focuses on understanding how individuals interpret and make meaning of their lived experiences within specific social contexts (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). A basic qualitative approach is particularly well-suited for exploring how caregivers perceive their role in educational goal-setting and the support systems available to them during a period of parental incarceration.

Participants in this study consisted of 12 former caregivers of children who were previously enrolled in the Head Start program at the correctional facility. These caregivers were recruited using invitation letters distributed to individuals who previously participated in the program and are no longer involved due to the child aging out or the parent's release on parole. This sample size is appropriate for qualitative research, where the aim is not generalizability but rather an in-depth understanding of participants' perspectives (cite). A sample of this size is large enough to capture the essence of the phenomenon while allowing for rich, detailed exploration of individual experiences.

Data were collected through semistructured interviews (see Appendix A), which allowed for flexibility in questioning while ensuring alignment with the research questions. These interviews served as the primary method of data collection for exploring how caregivers experienced the process of supporting mandated educational goals in the Head Start program.

Participant Selection

This study utilized purposeful criterion sampling to identify participants with direct, relevant experience related to the research problem. The population of interest consisted of non-incarcerated caregivers of children enrolled in a Head Start program situated within a women's correctional facility in Oregon. These caregivers were responsible for supporting the child's educational goals at home while the incarcerated parent participated in educational activities in the classroom. The sample included 12 caregivers who had previously engaged in this program but were no longer enrolled at the time of the study.

To ensure consistency and relevance, specific inclusion criteria were applied. Participants were required to be over the age of 18, serve or have served as the child's primary caregiver during the period of Head Start enrollment, and have participated in or supported the implementation of the child's educational goals. Individuals were excluded if they had not been directly involved in goal-setting or were currently enrolled in the program, to ensure interviews were based on complete caregiving experiences during and after participation in the program.

Recruitment was facilitated in partnership with Head Start teachers and administrators, who provided referrals based on eligibility criteria. Approved recruitment

flyers and email invitations were used to contact potential participants, and all communications adhered to protocols approved by the Institutional Review Board (IRB). Recorded Informed consent was obtained from all participants before the interview began and participants were informed of their rights, including the right to withdraw from the study at any time without consequence.

The target sample size was 10 to 12 participants, consistent with recommendations for qualitative research. Twelve participants were ultimately recruited and interviewed, which allowed for rich, detailed narratives that supported in-depth thematic analysis. Participants represented a diverse mix of caregiving roles, including grandmothers, fathers, aunts, and foster parents, each with unique perspectives on supporting the Head Start educational goals for children of incarcerated parents.

In qualitative research, the researcher serves as the primary instrument for data collection (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). In this study, I conducted all interviews and facilitated the data collection process using a semi-structured interview protocol designed to elicit responses aligned with the two research questions. The purpose of the interview guide was to explore caregiver's perspectives on implementing Head Start educational goals for children of incarcerated parents and their views on resources or training needed to support these goals The interview protocol was developed based on a thorough review of the literature related to Head Start, kinship caregiving, early childhood education, and the impact of parental incarceration. The questions were also informed by Bowen's family systems theory, which emphasizes how disruptions such as incarceration affect the dynamics and roles within a family unit. The guide included both core questions and follow-up prompts intended to encourage reflection and to gather detailed narratives from

participants with lived experience supporting the educational goals of children with incarcerated parents.

To ensure validity, the interview guide was reviewed by my dissertation committee and revised based on their feedback to improve clarity, flow, and alignment with the study's conceptual framework and research questions. The final protocol consisted of open-ended questions that addressed both educational goal-setting experiences and the supports or barriers caregivers encountered in that process.

All interviews were conducted one-on-one in a private setting via phone or video call, depending on participant preference and availability. Interviews were audio-recorded with the participants' informed consent, and I maintained field notes to document observations. Transcriptions were completed by the researcher, and all data were anonymized to protect participant confidentiality. Interview recordings, transcripts, and consent forms were securely stored on a password-protected device. A complete copy of the interview protocol is provided in Appendix A.

Data Analysis Plan

Data for this study were collected through semistructured interviews designed to explore the perspectives of caregivers of children of incarcerated parents regarding the implementation of mandated educational goals. The interview protocol was developed to align with the research questions and to elicit detailed responses related to the challenges, supports, and experiences associated with educational goal-setting in the Head Start program. This format allowed for both consistency across interviews and flexibility to probe deeper into individual experiences, enabling participants to share personal stories and contextual factors that influenced their involvement. The open-ended nature of the

questions encouraged rich, narrative responses that provided a comprehensive understanding of caregivers' roles and needs.

After each interview, I transcribed audio recordings and accompanying field notes to ensure accuracy and preserve the integrity of participants' responses. I then reviewed the transcripts to gain a deeper understanding of the data and prepared the files for analysis. The data were imported into Dedoose, a web-based qualitative data analysis software, which facilitated efficient coding, categorization, and theme development across participant interviews. Dedoose was created by a team of social science researchers at UCLA, primarily Dr. Eli Lieber and Dr. Thomas S. Weisner, as an evolution of their earlier tool, EthnoNotes. They, under the company SocioCultural Research Consultants (SCRC) founded around 2006 developed Dedoose with funding assistance to serve mixed-methods research needs (SocioCultural Research Consultants, LLC, 2024).

Using Dedoose, I applied a thematic coding approach to identify patterns and relationships within the data relevant to Research Question 1 (RQ 1) and Research Question 2 (RQ 2). Thematic coding allowed for the organization of codes into broader categories, helping to uncover recurring themes across interviews. As Sutton and Austin (2015) noted, coding enables the researcher to interpret the world through the participants' perspectives and experiences.

The analysis began with an inductive search for emerging themes, which were refined and organized according to the major ideas expressed by the caregivers. I organized the coded data by participants to identify both shared and divergent perspectives. Through this process, I was able to examine similarities and differences in

how caregivers described their roles, challenges, and needs in supporting Head Start educational goals. The use of Dedoose provided a structured and transparent process for coding, comparison, and retrieval of qualitative data, enhancing the dependability and confirmability of the study's findings.

Trustworthiness

In this basic qualitative study, I ensured trustworthiness by addressing the four key criteria identified in qualitative research: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Strategies such as member checking, providing thick descriptions, maintaining an audit trail, and engaging in reflexive journaling were used to enhance the rigor of the study. These methods helped ensure that the findings accurately reflected participants' perspectives and could be applied or understood in similar contexts. Attention to these criteria strengthened the overall validity and reliability of the research process and outcomes.

To establish credibility, I accurately captured participants lived experiences, perceptions, and beliefs through semi-structured interviews. I preserved the authenticity of participants' responses by using their exact words when coding and analyzing the data. I conducted member checks by sharing a summary of key findings with participants to confirm that the interpretations accurately reflected their perspectives. This process helped reduce the likelihood of researcher bias and ensured that participants' voices remained central in the interpretation of the data.

To support transferability, I provided thick, rich descriptions of the research setting, participants, and findings, allowing others to determine the extent to which the results may be applicable to similar contexts. By including detailed contextual

information, I aimed to provide enough clarity for readers to judge the relevance of the findings to their own settings or populations.

Dependability was established by maintaining a consistent and transparent research process. I kept detailed documentation of all stages of the study, including interview protocols, coding decisions, and data analysis procedures. This ensured that the study could be reviewed or replicated by others seeking to examine the integrity and logic of the process. Additionally, regular consultation with my chair and the use of qualitative data analysis software helped support a systematic and traceable approach to managing and interpreting the data. These steps reinforced the study's methodological rigor and contributed to the overall reliability of the findings.

To ensure confirmability, I engaged in regular reflexive journaling throughout the research process to acknowledge and reflect on my own assumptions, biases, and potential influence on data interpretation. I also triangulated findings by comparing themes across multiple participants to avoid overreliance on any single perspective. These steps supported an objective approach to data analysis and interpretation. By implementing these strategies, I strengthened the overall rigor and trustworthiness of the study and ensured that the findings authentically represented the experiences of caregivers of children of incarcerated parents participating in the Head Start program.

Throughout the data collection process, I encountered significant challenges related to scheduling interviews and maintaining participant engagement. Despite receiving written permission to recruit up to 12 caregivers from the Head Start program affiliated with the correctional facility, initial contact attempts were often met with silence. For example, some caregivers did not respond to email invitations, even after

follow-up messages were sent over a two-week span. This non-response may have been due to a combination of emotional hesitancy to discuss incarceration-related topics and competing personal responsibilities such as employment, childcare, and transportation obligations.

Even after participants agreed to participate, scheduling interviews proved to be complex and unpredictable. A recurring pattern emerged in which caregivers would initially confirm an interview time but later cancel, often with little notice. One caregiver, for instance, had to reschedule three times due to conflicting doctor appointments and work shifts. Another participant canceled the morning of the interview because of an unexpected family emergency. These repeated changes extended the data collection timeline well beyond what was originally anticipated and required ongoing communication, patience, and flexibility on my part as the researcher.

Holidays and school-related breaks further complicated scheduling. For example, spring break created a week-long window where none of the caregivers were available, and others indicated they were overwhelmed with parenting demands during holiday periods. To accommodate these circumstances, I offered interviews on evenings and weekends and made myself available for rescheduled sessions without pressure to the participants.

These challenges offered valuable insight into the real-world stressors faced by caregivers of children with incarcerated parents. The difficulty in aligning interview times directly mirrored the same barriers many caregivers reported facing when attempting to meet Head Start educational goals such as limited time, shifting responsibilities, and the emotional weight of supporting a child whose parent is

incarcerated. While these limitations initially disrupted the research timeline, they also strengthened the relevance and authenticity of the study findings by reflecting the very conditions under investigation.

Chapter 4: Results

This chapter presents the results of a qualitative study that explored the perspectives of caregivers of children with incarcerated parents regarding the implementation of mandated Head Start educational goals. The study aimed to answer two research questions through thematic analysis of semistructured interviews conducted with twelve caregiver participants. The chapter will outline the study setting, describe participant demographics, explain the data collection and analysis process, and present the key findings organized by research question and theme.

Setting

The research was conducted within the context of a Head Start program located at a women's correctional facility in Oregon. While incarcerated mothers participated in classes and programming with their children during in-facility sessions, the primary responsibility for supporting children's learning and implementing educational goals rested with caregivers in the community. These caregivers included relatives or guardians who transported children to the facility, participated in Head Start activities, and engaged with the program's staff.

Participant Demographics

The study sample included 12 caregivers of children whose mothers were incarcerated. Participants represented a range of caregiver roles, including grandmothers, fathers, aunts, and foster parents. All participants had experience engaging with the Head

Start program and supporting their children's educational development at home while facilitating visits to the correctional facility. Their caregiving situations varied in complexity, with some managing multiple children, navigating custody transitions, or balancing employment with caregiving duties. Despite these differences, each participant provided valuable insights into how they interpreted and implemented educational goals, as well as the emotional, logistical, and structural challenges they encountered throughout the process.

Data Collection

Data were collected through semistructured interviews guided by a researcher-developed protocol designed to align with the study's research questions. The interview questions were crafted to elicit rich, descriptive responses from caregivers regarding their experiences and perceptions related to their involvement in setting and implementing Head Start educational goals. All interviews were audio-recorded with participant consent, then transcribed verbatim to ensure accuracy and preserve the authenticity of participants' responses.

Following transcription, the data were uploaded into Dedoose, a web-based qualitative data analysis tool. Dedoose facilitated the organization, coding, and thematic analysis of the interview data. Using the software, I systematically applied codes to the transcripts, identified recurring patterns, and developed key themes that reflected the lived experiences and perspectives of the caregivers. The integration of Dedoose supported a rigorous and transparent analysis process, contributing to the overall trustworthiness and credibility of the study's findings.

Data Analysis

Thematic analysis was employed to code and interpret the interview transcripts. The analysis process began with multiple close readings of each transcript to become immersed in the data and to identify recurring ideas, key phrases, and significant experiences shared by the participants. An inductive coding approach was used, allowing codes to emerge organically from the data rather than being predetermined. These initial codes were then refined and grouped into broader themes that captured the essence of participants' responses and aligned with the study's research questions.

All transcripts were uploaded and analyzed using Dedoose, a web-based qualitative data analysis software. Dedoose facilitated the systematic coding and organization of data, allowing for the efficient retrieval and comparison of text segments across multiple interviews. The platform also supported visualization tools and coding reports that enhanced the depth and accuracy of theme development.

After coding was complete, a cross-case analysis was conducted to identify patterns, similarities, and differences across participant responses. This comparative process allowed for a richer understanding of how caregivers experienced the implementation of Head Start educational goals in varied but thematically connected ways. Themes that emerged from the analysis were then clearly aligned with each research question to ensure a coherent structure for interpreting and reporting the findings.

Research Question 1

Theme 1: Limited Caregiver Involvement in Goal Setting

A recurring theme was the lack of caregiver participation in the development of educational goals. Many caregivers expressed that they were not fully informed about the goals established between the teacher and the incarcerated mother, leading to confusion or limited understanding of how to support those goals at home. For example, one participant stated, “I didn’t really know what the goals were. I wasn’t part of the conversation.” Another responded, “Not that I know of. No one told me what I should be working on with her.” This lack of involvement contributed to caregivers feeling sidelined and unprepared to implement strategies effectively.

Theme 2: Guilt and Emotional Strain

Participants frequently described profound emotional hardships associated with caregiving under the complex and often overwhelming circumstances of parental incarceration. These emotional challenges were not only tied to the logistical burdens of caregiving but also to the deep psychological toll of assuming a parenting role during a time of family disruption. Several caregivers expressed intense feelings of guilt and self-doubt, particularly concerning their perceived inability to consistently support or fulfill the educational goals established through the Head Start program. This guilt was frequently compounded by other personal or familial stressors, including financial strain, unstable housing, employment challenges, and health concerns. For many caregivers, balancing the demands of their own lives while attempting to maintain a nurturing and educationally supportive environment for the child proved emotionally exhausting. Some shared that despite their best intentions, the constant pressures led to moments of

frustration, helplessness, and emotional fatigue. These experiences highlight the significant emotional labor involved in caregiving in contexts of incarceration and underscore the need for increased mental health supports and family-centered services within early childhood education frameworks like Head Start.

One participant noted, “There were days I just couldn’t do anything with her schoolwork. I was overwhelmed.” Another participant stated, “It was really hard. I felt like I wasn’t doing enough.” The emotional burden often intersected with profound feelings of loss particularly related to family separation as well as stress from ongoing court proceedings and the challenge of managing additional caregiving responsibilities for other children in the household.

Research Question 2

Theme 3: Transportation Challenges

Transportation difficulties emerged as one of the most prominent barriers. Ten of 12 caregivers mentioned that accessing the facility or attending Head Start meetings was hindered by unreliable transportation, scheduling conflicts, or geographic distance. For example, one participant said, “I had to work Thursdays, and no one else could take them.” Further, another participant mentioned, “The gas money helped, but not enough to cover the whole trip.” These barriers affected both attendance at program activities and follow-through with goal-related meetings.

Theme 4: Need for Additional Resources

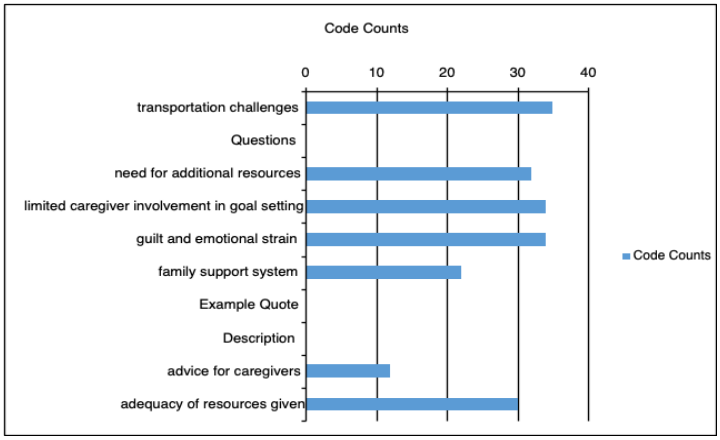
Many caregivers identified a need for practical resources and clearer communication about expectations. Requests included educational materials, winter clothing for children, and more direct instructions on how to support the child’s

development at home. One participant expressed, “They should give us more resources, like actual learning kits or activities.” Additionally, one participant stated, “It would help to have articles or ideas on how to do things at home.” The lack of tangible support compounded caregivers’ feelings of being underprepared and unsupported in their educational role.

Analysis of participant responses revealed a high level of consistency across demographic roles (e.g., fathers, grandmothers, foster parents), suggesting shared barriers in transportation and emotional burden regardless of caregiver type. Some participants with prior experience in early childhood education reported feeling slightly more confident in implementing goals, but they still noted frustration with communication gaps and lack of inclusion. Figure 1 references the code counts across all interviews.

Figure 1

Code Counts



Transportation emerged as the most frequently mentioned challenge across all caregiver interviews. With 35 coded references in Dedoose, caregivers repeatedly underscored the logistical burden of transporting children to the correctional facility and

attending Head Start activities. Many caregivers were juggling employment, childcare responsibilities for multiple children, and limited access to reliable vehicles or fuel. The burden of distance and conflicting schedules made consistent involvement difficult. As one caregiver put it, “I had to work Thursdays, and no one else could take them,” while another explained, “The gas money helped, but not enough to cover the whole trip.” These statements underscore how financial and structural limitations affect participation, especially for low-income families supporting incarcerated relatives.

Moreover, the difficulty of physically accessing Head Start programming due to transportation issues meant that caregivers missed opportunities to engage with educators, attend planning meetings, or receive progress updates. This had a compounding effect on their ability to follow through with the goals set by the incarcerated parent and teacher. Transportation was not merely a logistical problem; it functioned as a gatekeeper to participation, contributing to broader inequities in educational access for children of incarcerated parents.

Closely following transportation as a challenge was the theme of limited caregiver involvement in the educational goal-setting process. Dedoose analysis revealed 34 coded segments across participants indicating that caregivers felt left out of crucial conversations about their child’s learning objectives. Many noted that goals were often decided between the incarcerated mother and Head Start staff, with minimal or no input from the home-based caregiver. “I didn’t really know what the goals were. I wasn’t part of the conversation,” one participant lamented. Another remarked, “Not that I know of. No one told me what I should be working on with her.”

This exclusion created feelings of disconnection and powerlessness. Caregivers expressed a desire to contribute to the process and to be viewed as equal partners, especially since they were the ones primarily responsible for implementing these goals at home. The lack of clarity and involvement also led to reduced confidence and diminished accountability, further undermining the child's ability to meet developmental milestones. These findings support the need for inclusive practices that recognize all caregiver voices in collaborative educational planning.

Another pervasive theme in the interviews was the emotional burden experienced by caregivers, captured in 34 references within Dedoose. Caregivers described feelings of guilt, anxiety, and helplessness as they tried to balance the demands of caregiving, work, and supporting an incarcerated family member. This emotional strain often manifested in statements such as, "It was really hard. I felt like I wasn't doing enough," and "There were days I just couldn't do anything with her schoolwork. I was overwhelmed."

The guilt caregivers felt was twofold: they grieved the child's separation from their parent while simultaneously questioning their own adequacy in fulfilling educational roles they had not planned for. The caregivers' psychological strain, compounded by external stressors such as housing instability and financial insecurity, directly impacted their ability to support the child's learning goals. The findings align with Bowen's Family Systems Theory, which posits that stress in one part of the family system inevitably impacts the whole unit. These emotional dynamics underscore the importance of integrating mental health support into educational programs like Head Start that work with justice-impacted families.

Caregivers emphasized the importance of having access to tangible educational resources, a theme that emerged 32 times across interviews. Many stated they were willing and eager to help their children succeed but lacked the tools and guidance to do so effectively. As one participant explained, “They should give us more resources, like actual learning kits or activities,” while another shared, “It would help to have articles or ideas on how to do things at home.”

The lack of learning materials, digital tools, or age-appropriate books created barriers to consistent and meaningful educational engagement. Some caregivers expressed frustration with the absence of structured guidance or examples of how to reinforce classroom lessons at home. Without adequate resources, even the most committed caregiver struggled to bridge the home-school connection envisioned by Head Start’s educational philosophy. These findings strongly suggest the need for targeted investment in caregiver-friendly materials, especially in nontraditional caregiving contexts where formal training may be lacking.

While some caregivers acknowledged receiving some form of support from Head Start such as gas vouchers or occasional check-ins many questioned whether the resources were sufficient or appropriate. With 30 coded references, this theme captured a nuanced discussion about both appreciation and dissatisfaction. One caregiver noted, “The help was good, but it didn’t last long enough,” suggesting that while the intentions were positive, the execution fell short of their long-term needs.

The mismatch between what caregivers received and what they needed was often rooted in poor communication or lack of individualized planning. Resources that were not responsive to the family’s unique context such as cultural relevance, literacy level, or

household composition were perceived as symbolic rather than supportive. These insights highlight the necessity of creating adaptive, flexible, and family-specific support plans that account for the complexity of caregiving while a parent is incarcerated.

Frequency of Themes Identified in Caregiver Interviews

To further illustrate the patterns that emerged from the caregiver interviews, the figure below presents a thematic analysis frequency chart. This chart highlights the most commonly referenced themes across all twelve participants, based on the coded excerpts in Dedoose. The four dominant themes limited Caregiver Involvement in Goal Setting, Guilt and Emotional Strain, Need for Additional Resources, and Adequacy of Resources Given were identified through inductive coding and represent the most pressing concerns voiced by caregivers. The frequency with which these themes appeared in the data underscores their salience and provides empirical support for the study's qualitative findings. These themes reflect not only logistical and emotional challenges but also systemic barriers to successful implementation of Head Start educational goals for children of incarcerated parents.

Table 1

Thematic Analysis Frequency Table

Theme	Frequency
Limited Caregiver Involvement in Goal Setting	34
Guilt and Emotional Strain	34
Need for Additional Resources	32
Adequacy of Resources Given	30

A prominent theme emerging from the interviews was the limited involvement of caregivers in the initial educational goal-setting process. Despite being primary

facilitators of educational support at home, many caregivers reported being left out of conversations between Head Start teachers and the incarcerated mothers. The Dedoose coding analysis revealed that this theme occurred 34 times across interviews, indicating a consistent pattern of exclusion. One participant stated, *"I didn't really know what the goals were. I wasn't part of the conversation,"* underscoring the communication gap that impeded her ability to reinforce learning objectives. This disconnection resulted in caregivers feeling disempowered and inadequately prepared to help children achieve their Head Start goals.

The frequency and consistency of this theme suggest a systemic breakdown in collaborative planning within the Head Start program. While incarcerated mothers and educators met regularly, caregivers often acting as teachers at home were not routinely informed or engaged. The lack of shared understanding hindered the continuity of learning from classroom to home, weakening the child's educational progress. This finding echos earlier research on fragmented family-school partnerships in nontraditional caregiving contexts, further validating the need for inclusive planning processes that center caregivers' voices.

The emotional weight carried by caregivers emerged as another dominant theme, with 34 instances of emotional strain and guilt coded in Dedoose. Many caregivers described feeling inadequate, overwhelmed, or emotionally taxed as they tried to balance Head Start goals with broader family responsibilities. One caregiver confessed, "There were days I just couldn't do anything with her schoolwork. I was overwhelmed." Another echoed, "It was really hard. I felt like I wasn't doing enough."

These emotional burdens were not isolated events, but recurring narratives woven throughout participants lived experiences. The burden was especially intense among caregivers who were simultaneously managing work obligations, financial instability, and the emotional toll of supporting children through the trauma of maternal incarceration. These findings align closely with Bowen's Family Systems Theory, illustrating how stress experienced by one member (the incarcerated mother) reverberates across the family system, impacting caregivers and children alike. The frequency with which caregivers articulate emotional distress underscores the need for mental health support and emotional resilience training within Head Start caregiver outreach efforts.

Transportation barriers surfaced as the most frequently cited challenge, with 35 distinct references made across interviews. These obstacles were mentioned by nearly every caregiver, demonstrating the critical role that logistical access plays in educational participation. One participant shared, "The gas money helped, but not enough to cover the whole trip," while another explained, "I had to work Thursdays, and no one else could take them."

These challenges inhibited caregivers' ability to attend parent meetings, engage in goal-setting conversations, and participate in classroom activities. Several participants also noted the stress of relying on others for transportation or having to take time off work, highlighting the compounded impact on financial and emotional well-being. The persistent recurrence of this theme suggests that even modest interventions such as transportation stipends, carpool coordination, or virtual meetings could significantly enhance caregiver involvement. Transportation access, or lack thereof, functioned as a

gatekeeper to full program participation, particularly for those living in rural areas or working non-traditional hours

The theme of needing additional resources was voiced 32 times, reflecting widespread concern over the adequacy of tools available to caregivers. Participants consistently expressed that while they were eager to support children's educational goals, they lacked concrete materials, structured guidance, and clarity on expectations. One caregiver noted, "They should give us more resources, like actual learning kits or activities," and another added, "It would help to have articles or ideas on how to do things at home."

This feedback reveals a critical disconnect between the program's expectations and the caregivers' ability to meet them. Caregivers were left improvising support strategies with minimal assistance, undermining the structured, goal-oriented approach of Head Start. The desire for take home kits, digital tools, and simple written instructions reflects both a practical need and a yearning for validation and support from the Head Start program. These findings suggest that expanding caregiver training and resource distribution could greatly enhance goal implementation success and caregiver confidence.

Closely linked to the previous theme, caregivers discussed the adequacy of resources already provided, with 30 mentions of dissatisfaction or ambiguity. While some caregivers acknowledged receiving basic materials or communication from teachers, many felt that these were insufficient or lacked personalization. Caregivers with limited educational backgrounds or experience in early childhood development were especially affected, as generic tools did not meet their unique support needs.

This theme was often mentioned in tandem with the others, particularly emotional strain and exclusion from planning revealing how overlapping limitations compounded the challenges faced by caregivers. The frequency of this theme reinforces the recommendation that Head Start programs adopt a differentiated support model that tailors resources to individual caregiver contexts and needs. This approach would not only enhance implementation outcomes but also promote equity and inclusion for caregivers in underserved populations.

Evidence of Trustworthiness

To ensure the trustworthiness and rigor of the study's findings, I employed multiple strategies aligned with the four established criteria in qualitative research: credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). For credibility, I used member checking to validate participant responses and ensure that their perspectives were accurately captured. Dependability was supported through a clearly documented research process, including detailed records of data collection and coding procedures. Confirmability was enhanced by maintaining a reflexive journal to minimize researcher bias and demonstrate how findings were grounded in participant data. To strengthen transferability, I provided thick, rich descriptions of the study setting, participants, and context, enabling readers to determine the applicability of the findings to other environments or populations.

Credibility was strengthened through member checking, in which participants were given the opportunity to review and verify summarized interpretations of their interview responses. This process ensured that the findings accurately represented their experiences and that no misinterpretations or researcher biases distorted their

perspectives. In addition, data were collected through semi-structured interviews guided by a consistent protocol to elicit detailed and meaningful responses aligned with the study's research questions.

Dependability was addressed by applying a uniform and replicable process throughout data collection and analysis. I maintained consistency in the use of the interview protocol across all participants, documented methodological decisions, and created an audit trail within the Dedoose platform. This audit trail included time-stamped entries of coding activity, codebook revisions, and memos, enabling transparency and traceability throughout the analytical process.

Confirmability was supported through reflexive journaling, in which I recorded my thoughts, decisions, and potential biases throughout the research process. These journal entries helped me remain self-aware and minimize personal influence during data interpretation. Additionally, the use of Dedoose helped reinforce objectivity by structuring the coding process and allowing for the retrieval of coded data in a systematic and reproducible manner.

Transferability was enhanced by providing thick, rich descriptions of the research setting, participants, and procedures. This included comprehensive contextual information such as participant demographics (e.g., age, gender, caregiver relationship to the child), the unique structure of the correctional Head Start program, and the caregiving circumstances under which participants supported educational goals. By thoroughly describing the routines within the facility, including the Head Start class sessions attended by children and their incarcerated mothers, and the ways in which caregivers interacted with teachers and educational materials outside the facility, readers are

equipped to understand the environment in which the study took place. These details allow others to determine the extent to which the findings may apply to similar early childhood education programs, correctional-based interventions, or caregiving scenarios involving children of incarcerated parents. The inclusion of direct quotes from caregivers further grounded the study in lived experience and offered nuanced insights into the transferability of the results to other family, educational, or correctional contexts.

Results

Research Question 1

Theme 1: Limited Caregiver Involvement in Goal Setting

Participants expressed a sense of exclusion from the educational goal-setting process. Many reported that they were informed of goals after they had been established and were not invited to provide input. This lack of engagement led to feelings of disempowerment and uncertainty about how to support the child's learning.

Theme 2: Guilt and Emotional Strain

Caregivers reported experiencing significant emotional stress related to their caregiving responsibilities. Feelings of guilt were commonly expressed, often stemming from the inability to fully meet educational goals due to external pressures, such as work demands or emotional strain from managing the incarceration of a family member.

Research Question 2

Theme 3: Transportation Challenges

Transportation emerged as a major barrier to caregiver participation in the Head Start program. Participants described difficulties attending meetings and events due to a lack of reliable transportation, long travel distances, and incompatible scheduling.

Theme 4: Need for Additional Resources

Caregivers identified a need for more educational resources, including learning materials, tutoring support, and clear guidance on implementing goals at home. Participants also expressed a desire for improved communication with Head Start staff to better understand and support their children's developmental objectives.

Summary

The thematic analysis of caregiver interviews revealed four primary themes that captured the core of their experiences with implementing mandated educational goals within the Head Start program. These themes emerged through an in-depth examination of participants' narratives and highlighted both the structural and emotional dimensions of caregiving in the context of parental incarceration.

The identified themes reflect the complexities caregivers encountered while attempting to support children's educational progress. These included logistical barriers, emotional stressors, lack of resources, and varying levels of understanding regarding Head Start requirements and expectations. Collectively, the themes offer a nuanced view of the interconnected factors that influenced caregivers' ability to follow through with the educational goals they helped create.

These findings provide critical insight into the real-world challenges faced by caregivers and underscore the need for tailored support and program adjustments. The themes serve as the foundation for the discussion and recommendations presented in Chapter 5, which aims to translate these insights into practical strategies for improving family engagement, program responsiveness, and outcomes for children of incarcerated parents.

Chapter 5: Discussion, Conclusions, and Recommendations

This section provides an in-depth discussion of the findings presented in Chapter 4, situating them within the broader context of existing literature and the study's conceptual framework, which is grounded in Bowen's family systems theory. By examining the perspectives of caregivers of children with incarcerated parents, the analysis draws meaningful connections between the study's emergent themes and prior research on parental incarceration, early childhood education, and family engagement. The section elaborates on findings, including emotional, practical, and systemic challenges faced by caregivers, and interprets their significance in relation to Head Start's mandated educational goals.

In addition to unpacking the meaning of these findings, this segment addresses the limitations of the study, including constraints related to participant sampling, setting, and the scope of qualitative inquiry. Acknowledging these limitations provides a foundation for understanding the boundaries of the study's applicability while also highlighting areas for future investigation. The discussion also offers practical, policy-based, and scholarly recommendations informed by the data. These recommendations aim to strengthen the capacity of Head Start programs and other early childhood initiatives to effectively engage and support caregivers impacted by incarceration. Specific suggestions are made for enhancing caregiver training, improving communication between Head Start staff and kinship providers, and expanding access to wraparound services.

Finally, the section concludes by summarizing the broader implications of the research. It underscores the importance of integrating family systems approaches into early childhood education models, particularly when working with vulnerable

populations. By highlighting the lived experiences of caregivers navigating incarceration-related challenges, the findings provide actionable insights to inform policy reform, educator training, and community-based supports that can foster positive developmental outcomes for young children affected by parental incarceration.

The analysis of interview data, conducted through thematic coding in Dedoose, revealed that caregivers of children of incarcerated parents encounter a range of emotional, structural, and logistical challenges when attempting to support the mandated educational goals established through the Head Start program. Through multiple readings of transcripts, inductive coding, and cross-case analysis, four primary themes emerged that illuminated the core obstacles caregivers faced across diverse caregiving experiences. One significant challenge was limited involvement in the goal-setting process. Many caregivers expressed that while educational goals were developed collaboratively between the incarcerated parent and the Head Start teacher, they often felt excluded or only minimally included in the planning or decision-making. This disconnect led to confusion and a lack of ownership over the goals they were expected to support at home.

Caregivers also described experiencing emotional burdens, including guilt, stress, and helplessness. These emotional responses were often tied to their struggle to meet the expectations of both the incarcerated parent and the program, particularly when they were also managing complex family dynamics or trauma-related stress from the incarceration itself. Caregivers also described experiencing profound emotional burdens, including guilt, stress, and a persistent sense of helplessness. These emotional responses were deeply intertwined with the demands of caregiving in the context of parental

incarceration, where caregivers were expected to fulfill dual roles supporting the educational development of the child while also maintaining communication and coordination with the incarcerated parent. Many participants shared that they felt torn between meeting the expectations of Head Start educators, adhering to the incarcerated parent's wishes, and addressing the child's day-to-day emotional and developmental needs. These pressures were further exacerbated by complex family dynamics, such as unresolved conflicts, shifting custody arrangements, and strained relationships with extended family members. Several caregivers also reflected on the lingering trauma caused by the incarceration event itself. As a result, the caregiving experience was often described as emotionally exhausting, and many caregivers reported a lack of sufficient mental health support to cope with these intersecting stressors.

Practical barriers were another recurring and significant theme raised by participants. Many caregivers reported encountering a range of logistical challenges that impeded their ability to fully engage with the Head Start program or implement educational goals at home. One of the most frequently mentioned obstacles was unreliable or inconsistent transportation. Several caregivers shared experiences of having to rely on friends, extended family members, or public transit systems that did not align with Head Start schedules, often resulting in missed opportunities for parent meetings, classroom engagement, or timely delivery of learning materials. In addition to transportation difficulties, caregivers described juggling multiple competing responsibilities, including full-time or shift-based employment, caring for other children or aging relatives, and managing household needs. These overlapping demands often left caregivers with little time or energy to engage in structured learning activities with the

child or to attend Head Start workshops and events. Some also noted a lack of clarity or consistency in communication from the program, making it difficult to understand exactly what was expected of them or how to best support the child's developmental goals outside the classroom. Access to support services also emerged as a persistent barrier. Several participants reported not knowing where to seek help or feeling overwhelmed by the complexity of navigating social services. In some cases, caregivers were unaware of existing resources provided by Head Start or felt hesitant to ask for assistance due to stigma or prior negative experiences with institutions. This lack of coordinated support often led to feelings of frustration and isolation, further compounding the challenges of caregiving in the context of incarceration.

Despite these substantial barriers, caregivers consistently demonstrated a deep sense of commitment to their children's growth and development. Their interviews reflected strong emotional investment and a sincere desire to be active participants in the child's educational journey. However, this motivation was frequently undermined by the absence of concrete tools, accessible training, and reliable support systems. Caregivers expressed a need for practical strategies, clearer guidance, and stronger communication from Head Start staff to help bridge the gap between their intentions and their capacity to implement learning goals effectively. These findings underscore the importance of tailored, flexible support approaches that acknowledge and address the real-world constraints faced by families impacted by incarceration

These findings, grounded in participant voices and coded thematically using Dedoose, offer valuable insight into the lived experiences of caregivers navigating the intersection of parental incarceration and early childhood education. The themes

identified form the basis for the discussion and practice-focused recommendations in Chapter 5, which aim to enhance caregiver engagement and strengthen the implementation of mandated goals in Head Start programs.The findings of on the multifaceted challenges experienced by families affected by incarceration.

The use of thematic coding in Dedoose was instrumental in capturing the caregivers lived experiences an approach supported by Sutton and Austin (2015), who emphasize that thematic analysis is essential in making meaning from participants' narratives in qualitative research. Through this method, the study uncovered not only surface-level barriers but also deeper emotional and structural constraints.

Transportation challenges emerged as a consistent obstacle for caregivers attempting to support Head Start educational goals. This finding supports earlier research by Arditti (2012), who identified logistical barriers such as transportation and scheduling conflicts as primary limitations to family engagement in educational contexts for families affected by incarceration. Many caregivers in this study described difficulties in attending meetings, transporting children to school-related activities, or accessing resources issues often compounded by limited financial means and systemic disadvantages.

In addition, emotional strain including feelings of guilt, isolation, and overwhelm was a recurring theme among participants. This mirrors the work of Poehlmann-Tynan (2015), who documented the psychological and emotional toll that incarceration takes on families, particularly caregivers thrust into unplanned parenting roles. The caregivers in this study expressed a desire to support their children's development, but often lacked the resources, training, and inclusive support systems necessary to do so effectively.

Together, these findings reinforce the urgent need to design inclusive, supportive, and flexible early childhood education environments that acknowledge and accommodate the unique needs of caregivers of children with incarcerated parents. Programs like Head Start must consider outreach, improved caregiver communication, and additional support mechanisms to mitigate these compounding disadvantages and promote educational equity for this vulnerable population.

Conceptual Framework Application Bowen's Family Systems Theory served as the guiding theoretical framework for this study and provided a valuable lens through which to interpret the findings. According to the theory, when one member of a family experiences a significant stressor such as incarceration, the impact reverberates throughout the entire family unit (Kerr & Bowen, 1988). The concept of emotional interdependence within family systems is central to this framework, and the results of this study offer strong empirical support for this principle. Caregivers in the study frequently described taking on expanded roles in the absence of the incarcerated parent, not only assuming full-time caregiving responsibilities but also managing the emotional, logistical, and educational needs of the child. These caregivers often absorbed the stress and emotional burden of both the incarcerated parent and the child, a dynamic that reflects Bowen's assertion that emotional stress is distributed across family members. Participants reported feelings of guilt, anxiety, and pressure particularly around meeting mandated educational goals in the Head Start program while simultaneously managing household instability, limited financial resources, and disrupted family routines. The study's findings also highlight how systemic factors including lack of resources, limited inclusion in decision-making, and logistical challenges exacerbate strain within the

family system. These dynamics align with Bowen's emphasis on systemic functioning, which views family struggles not as isolated issues but as interconnected responses within a larger relational framework. In this case, the incarceration of one parent disrupted the caregiving structure, educational coordination, and emotional stability of the entire family unit. These insights reinforce the theory's relevance and underscore the need for systemic, family-centered interventions within early childhood programs like Head Start. Addressing the needs of just the child or incarcerated parent in isolation is insufficient. Effective support must consider the caregiver's pivotal role and the relational context that shapes child development and goal implementation. Head Start programs serving children of incarcerated parents would benefit from integrating trauma-informed, family-systems-oriented practices to strengthen the caregiver-child-parent triad and improve long-term outcomes.

Limitations of the Study

While this study offers valuable insight into the experiences of caregivers of children of incarcerated parents within a Head Start setting, several limitations should be acknowledged. First, the study was conducted within a single Head Start program located in a women's correctional facility in Oregon. The findings may reflect the unique characteristics of this specific setting and may not be fully transferable to other Head Start programs or caregiving arrangements across different regions or populations.

Second, the study involved a small, purposefully selected sample of 12 former caregivers, which, while appropriate for qualitative research, limits the breadth of representation. The goal of the study was to gather in-depth, descriptive accounts rather than to generalize findings; however, the limited sample size may not capture the full

diversity of experiences among caregivers of children with incarcerated parents. Future research with larger and more diverse samples could enhance the richness and applicability of findings across contexts.

Third, the study relied exclusively on self-reported data collected through semi-structured interviews. Although this method was well-suited to explore caregivers' perceptions in depth, self-reporting introduces the possibility of recall bias, selective memory, or social desirability bias, which may influence the accuracy or completeness of the responses. While steps such as member checking were employed to enhance credibility, these factors remain important considerations.

Additionally, this study focused solely on the caregiver's perspective. It did not include insights from Head Start educators, administrators, or the children themselves. As a result, the findings represent only one dimension of a multifaceted system. Including multiple perspectives in future research particularly those of teachers and incarcerated parents could offer a more comprehensive understanding of how educational goals are created, communicated, and supported across the caregiver-parent-educator triad. Finally, while the use of Dedoose supports systematic analysis and thematic coding, qualitative data analysis is inherently interpretive. The process of identifying, organizing, and interpreting themes requires the researcher to make subjective decisions based on context, language, and tone, which introduces the potential for bias. Despite strategies to enhance trustworthiness, researcher bias cannot be entirely eliminated. The perspectives shared were limited to a specific group of caregivers in one correctional Head Start program, which may not reflect the full diversity of experiences in other regions or settings. These limitations highlight the need for continued multi-perspective research into the

educational and emotional experiences of families affected by incarceration to ensure broader applicability and deeper understanding of their needs and strengths.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study and the challenges identified by caregivers of children of incarcerated parents, several recommendations are proposed for practice, policy, and future research. For practice, Head Start programs should consider offering transportation assistance to enable greater caregiver participation in meetings, activities, and goal-setting processes. Many caregivers in the study reported logistical barriers that limited their involvement, particularly transportation challenges. Programs should also increase access to educational resources, such as take-home learning kits, digital tools, and academic support materials, to empower caregivers who are otherwise willing but under-resourced. Additionally, flexible and consistent communication channels such as virtual conferencing, mobile apps, or text updates should be established to foster collaboration between caregivers and educators, especially in nontraditional caregiving arrangements.

From a policy perspective, funding should be allocated for the development of caregiver training modules specifically designed for families impacted by incarceration. Such modules could offer strategies for supporting child development, navigating emotional stress, and engaging with educational systems. Furthermore, policies should be revised or developed to intentionally include caregivers in the educational planning and goal-setting process, recognizing their critical role in supporting children outside of school.

Finally, investments in trauma-informed programming within early childhood education are essential. These programs should acknowledge the layered effects of incarceration on families and equip educators with the tools to respond compassionately and effectively. In terms of future research, additional studies are needed to build on this study's findings and address its limitations. Future work should include the perspectives of educators, administrators, and children, offering a more holistic understanding of the educational ecosystem in Head Start programs serving children of incarcerated parents. Longitudinal studies that examine the long-term impacts of caregiver involvement on children's academic and social-emotional outcomes would also be beneficial.

Future research should examine caregiver experiences across a broader range of geographic locations, including rural, urban, and suburban contexts, to better understand how differing community resources, cultural norms, and systemic barriers influence the implementation of Head Start educational goals. Additionally, exploring variations in Head Start program models such as center-based versus home-based settings, or programs integrated within correctional facilities versus those in the community can offer critical insights into how structural and programmatic differences affect caregiver engagement and child outcomes. Such comparative research would provide a more comprehensive picture of the diverse challenges and supports experienced by caregivers of children with incarcerated parents, ultimately informing more equitable and responsive early childhood education strategies.

Conclusion

This study amplifies the voices of caregivers who occupy a vital yet often unacknowledged role in supporting the educational development of children with

incarcerated parents. Through in-depth interviews and thematic analysis, the study uncovered a range of emotional, logistical, and systemic barriers that caregivers face while attempting to implement Head Start educational goals. These findings reinforce the importance of recognizing caregivers as key stakeholders in early childhood education, particularly in the context of parental incarceration where family structures are often disrupted and support systems are strained.

By examining the lived experiences of caregivers through the lens of Bowen's Family Systems Theory, the study revealed the interconnected nature of stress and responsibility within caregiving relationships. Caregivers not only absorbed the emotional burdens of the incarcerated parent and the child but also navigated structural barriers such as transportation limitations, lack of access to educational materials, and exclusion from critical decision-making processes. Despite these challenges, caregivers expressed a strong commitment to their roles and a willingness to support their children's growth provided they were given the tools and support necessary to do so.

This research contributes to a growing body of scholarship advocating for inclusive, trauma-informed, and family-centered educational practices. The findings suggest that targeted support such as transportation assistance, increased resource accessibility, flexible communication, and formal inclusion in educational planning. Head Start programs can better serve families impacted by incarceration.

Additionally, policy-level investments in caregiver training and trauma-informed programming are critical for addressing the complex needs of these families. Ultimately, this study underscores the urgent need for educational systems to broaden their definitions of parental involvement and family engagement. When caregivers are

equipped, included, and supported, they can play a transformative role in helping children of incarcerated parents thrive despite the adversity they face. Continued research and systemic reform are essential to ensure that Head Start and similar programs fulfill their mission of promoting equity and opportunity for all children, especially those most affected by social and structural disadvantages.

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Appendix A: Interview Protocol

DATE OF INTERVIEW:

LOCATION (SITE):

CLASSROOM:

INTERVIEWER:

INTERVIEWEE:

INTRODUCTION:

Thank you for participating in this interview. My name is Alissa Stark the researcher, and I will facilitate each study interview.

Written permission will be obtained from the Head Start director to interview up to 12 participants. The goal of this study interview is to answer the following research question:

RQ 1. What is the perspective of caregivers of children of incarcerated parents regarding the implementation of the mandated Head Start educational goals?

RQ 2. What is the perspective of caregivers about the training or resources needed to meet established goals?

Answers to the research questions may provide valuable information to support aregivers of children of incarcerated parents

Participants will be invited to participate in this study through email addresses, which will be supplied by the Head Start Teacher.

- An informed consent form will be sent to each participant with the invitation to explain the nature of the study and the expectations for volunteering to participate.

- Informed consent forms will be received from participants prior to the study interview.
- The guiding interview questions for this study consist of five questions for RQ1 and five questions for RQ2, for a total of ten questions.
- Interview notes will be taken during the semi-structured interview to be used later to mitigate discrepancies in data collected.
- Participant's confidentiality will be protected so that participants are not linked with the data and that No identifiable information is presented.
- Each participant will be assigned a number which only the researcher will know.
- Participants' geographical information will not be made public.
- Participation in this study interview is voluntary and participants may withdraw any time without repercussion.

Do I have permission to record the interview? Do you have any questions?

INTERVIEWER INSTRUCTIONS:

1. Conduct the interview in an unbiased manner.

2. Ask the interviewee the interview questions in the order listed.

3. Allow the interviewee adequate time to respond to questions.

4. Record the interviewee's responses as accurately as possible.

DATE OF INTERVIEW:

LOCATION (SITE):

CLASSROOM:

INTERVIEWER:

INTERVIEWEE:

Research Question Interview Question 1: What is the perspective of caregivers of children of incarcerated parents regarding the implementation of the mandated Head Start educational goals?

1. How were you informed by the teacher when you enrolled that you would be setting Head Start educational goals?
2. Describe the information given about the educational goals and your part of the process.
3. How were you able to find the time to support these goals at home?
4. Please explain the collaboration between the teacher and caregiver when setting educational goals?
5. How were you informed on the progress of the educational goal at school?

Research Interview Question 2: What is the perspective of caregivers about the training or resources needed to meet established goals?

1. How were you informed by the teacher when you enrolled that you would be setting Head Start educational goals?
2. Tell me about the resources you have in your home to support the implementation of educational goals.
3. How were you informed by the teacher when you enrolled that you would be setting Head Start educational goals?

4.What resources did the teacher give you to support working on the educational goals at home?

5. Were you able to complete an educational goal and move onto creating a new one? If not, why?

Is there anything else you would like to add?

Again, thank you for participating in this study interview.

Appendix B: Recruitment Flyer

Interview study seeks people who were caregivers of children of incarcerated parents

There is a new study about the experiences of caregivers of children of incarcerated parents that could help better understand the gap in practice and resources needed to support this population. For this study, you are invited to describe your experiences as a caregiver of a child of an incarcerated parent.

About the study:

- One 30-45 minute zoom interview that will be audio recorded
- To protect your privacy, the published study will not share any names or details that identify you

Volunteers must meet these requirements:

- 18 years old or older
- A previous caregiver of a child of an incarcerated parent at the target Head Start at the correctional facility.
- This interview is part of the doctoral study for Alissa Stark, a Ph.D. student at Walden University.

To confidentially volunteer, contact the researcher: