

Far Apart, Close in Heart: Exploring Representations of Familial Incarceration in Children's Picturebooks

RHIANNON M. MATON, BREEANNA DEXTER, NICOLETTE McKEON,
EMILY URIAS-VELASQUEZ, & BREANNA WASHINGTON

We examine how selected texts depict the racial identities of family members who are incarcerated, issues and circumstances surrounding the theme of breaking the law, modes of communication used by children to stay in touch with family members who are incarcerated, and the various socioemotional support systems available for children.

CHILDREN'S PICTUREBOOKS hold noteworthy potential for reducing shame and stigma around penal incarceration and supporting some of our most vulnerable student populations—those who are personally affected by the U.S. incarceration system. Nationally, one in 100 adults is currently incarcerated. Meanwhile, more than 2.7 million U.S. children—or one in 28 children (The Pew Charitable Trusts, 2010)—currently have a parent who is incarcerated, and many more U.S. children face the daily effects of familial incarceration due to past parental incarceration or the incarceration of other family members and loved ones. For the purpose of this article, *familial incarceration* refers to the penal imprisonment of a child's close family member(s), including parents, siblings, grandparents, guardians or close caregivers, or others recognized by a child to be a member of their immediate family. Previous research has shown that children with loved ones who are incarcerated often have unique emotional, relational, and educational needs (Bernstein, 2005; L. Davis & Shlafer, 2017) and can face persistent barriers to school success (Haskins, 2014; Haskins & Jacobsen, 2017; Haskins & McCauley, 2019). Parents and guardians, teachers, social workers, counselors, and

others are often the primary people charged with providing responsive information and support to this group of children, yet they frequently have not received training on their unique experiences and needs.

Meanwhile, researchers embracing critical multicultural approaches have long advocated for the use of picturebooks in supporting and reflecting the experiences of children with diverse identities and life experiences (see Crawley, 2017; Crisp et al., 2016; Lester, 2014; Skrlac Lo, 2019; Sullivan & Urraro, 2019; Thomas, 2016; Uliassi & Czirr, 2018; Wargo & Coleman, 2021; Wiseman, 2013). In recent years there has been a steady increase in the number of published children's picturebooks addressing the topic of familial incarceration. Such texts present opportunities for children to see reflections of their own experiences, learn about families who are similar to and different from their own, and challenge the stigma often associated with incarceration. While this growing body of children's literature has been featured in published book lists (see Maton et al., n.d.; New York Initiative for Children of Incarcerated Parents, n.d.), to date there is no published research examining the range of topics and content explored in this body of literature. There is a need to carefully examine

and chronicle the ways in which children's picturebooks represent incarceration and the experiences of children with loved ones who are incarcerated.

This article strives to fill this gap by using a penal abolitionist frame to conduct a critical content analysis of children's picturebooks that address the topic of familial incarceration. *Penal abolitionism* points to the criminal legal system as crucial in maintaining ongoing social and economic oppression and critiques the systems and structures maintaining historicized oppression while calling for alternative, nonpenal regulatory legal approaches (e.g., Coyle & Nagel, 2022; A. Davis et al., 2022). As such, it offers a critical lens through which to read textual representations of the criminal legal system and its effects in children's picturebooks. The research question guiding our work is this: How is familial incarceration represented in contemporary English-language children's picturebooks? To answer this question, we conducted a critical content analysis (Beach et al., 2009) of 19 picturebooks published between 1990 and 2019 that feature children who have a parent or other loved one who is incarcerated. We were particularly interested in how the books depicted the racial identities of characters, breaking the law, how children communicate with their loved one who is incarcerated, and the support systems available for children.

We noticed that schools tend to fail to acknowledge or meet the needs of children with loved ones who are incarcerated. In response, we decided to closely examine a range of picturebooks with the intention of integrating them into our teaching in order to support both destigmatizing incarceration as well as providing an entryway to more responsive relationships with our students who are experiencing familial incarceration.

We initially embarked on this work because four of us are either practicing or preservice elementary school teachers, and in our jobs and field placements, we noticed that schools tend to fail to acknowledge or meet the needs of children with loved ones who are incarcerated. In response, we decided to closely examine a range of picturebooks with the intention of integrating them into our teaching in order

to support both destigmatizing incarceration as well as providing an entryway to more responsive relationships with our students who are experiencing familial incarceration. Our intended readership for this article is children's literature scholars and practitioners working directly with children experiencing familial incarceration, with a particular focus on teachers and social workers.

Literature Review

Our analysis of this body of children's picturebooks on incarceration draws upon literature in two areas. First, we ground our work in a penal abolitionist theoretical framework. Next, we draw upon the work of scholars and practitioners who have examined the effects of familial incarceration and offer insight into the provision of support to children.

PENAL ABOLITIONISM AS A THEORETICAL FRAME

Notable critical scholars and social movement activists have brought public attention to the systemic and structural inequities embedded in the criminal legal system. Peter Enns (2016) highlighted the exorbitantly high rates of criminalization in the United States: "The United States hands down longer sentences, spends more money on prisons, and executes more of its citizens than every other advanced industrial democracy" (p. 3). Meanwhile, activists and scholars point to the ubiquity of lawbreaking within human behavior broadly, and the selective response by the criminal legal system, leading to the criminalization of some populations (e.g., those who are racialized and/or economically insecure) over others (e.g., those who are racially privileged and/or economically secure) (Coyle & Schept, 2017; A. Davis, 2003). Prison abolition activist Mariame Kaba (2020), who also authored the picturebook *Missing Daddy* (2018), argued that the only just solution to such ongoing systemic inequity embedded within the social order and established legal system is abolishment of the current criminal legal system itself.

Coyle and Nagel (2022) argued that a *carceral logic* underlies most aspects of modern life. This carceral logic consists of "the control and punishment mindset that suggests criminalization is the best paradigm to organize human life and to solve social problems besetting the 99%" (p. 1). This punitive and control-oriented approach infuses the ideology, ethics, and practices of nearly all social institutions, including the criminal legal system and mainstream schools (Coyle & Nagel, 2022). Such an orientation is contrasted with a *penal abolitionist framework*, which involves countering historicized oppression through critiquing ideologies and policies supporting socioeconomic and racialized oppression, while envisioning and implementing new regulatory frameworks. Angela

Davis (1983, 2003; Davis et al., 2022), a longtime advocate of penal abolitionism through her activism and scholarship, has pointed to the ways in which historicized class, race, and gender-based oppression are implicated in, and maintained through, the U.S. penal system. Alexander (2010) built on Davis's work to argue that mass incarceration replaces slavery as the "new racial caste system" (p. 3) and documented how the carceral system continues to perpetuate the historically situated U.S. racial hierarchy. Economically insecure white people are shown to be disproportionately targeted by the criminal legal system (Hayes & Barnhorst, 2020) alongside those who are Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) (Alexander, 2010; A. Davis, 1983, 2003). Meanwhile, McLeod (2015) pointed to the ethical dimensions of a penal abolitionist stance:

Prison abolition seeks to end the use of punitive policing and imprisonment as the primary means of addressing what are essentially social, economic, and political problems.... Abolition is not a simple call for an immediate opening or tearing down of all prison walls, but entails an array of alternative nonpenal regulatory frameworks and an ethic that recognizes the violence, dehumanization, and moral wrong inherent in any act of caging or chaining—or otherwise confining and controlling by penal force—human beings. (p. 1172)

Penal abolitionist logic is in opposition to the carceral logic that positions carceral punishment as the just and necessary response to lawbreaking and currently dominates intellectual and policy circles (Coyle & Nagel, 2022). A penal abolitionist logic instead advocates for a long-term project of decarceration that advances radically new approaches to ensuring public safety and well-being (A. Davis, 2003; A. Davis et al., 2022; McLeod, 2015).

CHILDREN AND FAMILIAL INCARCERATION

Researchers have noted that children with family members who are incarcerated are more susceptible to a range of specific challenges within and beyond schools. Parental incarceration is listed as one form of what is known as *adverse childhood experiences*, which on their own, and when combined with other adverse childhood experiences, can increase the development of risk factors affecting disease and well-being throughout the life course (Souers & Hall, 2016). Children may at times face upheaval in family dynamics and support systems (Dallaire, 2007), higher than usual risk for mental health challenges and sadness (L. Davis & Shlafer, 2017; Thurman et al., 2018), some risk of social isolation (Nesmith & Ruhland, 2008), and challenges in maintaining focused attention on and in school (Geller et al., 2012). Further, it is well known that rates of early school leaving escalate for children affected

by familial incarceration (Dallaire et al., 2010). While it is true that familial incarceration inflicts negative effects on children (e.g., what are often termed "risks" or "risk factors" in the scholarly and practitioner literature), we, alongside others (e.g., see Gadsden et al., 2009), wish to emphasize that these challenges are the result of external systemic and structural factors, rather than the individualized characteristics of children or families.

And yet, even as we reject the assumption of individual or familial culpability for the harmful effects of familial incarceration on children, in the short term it is necessary to provide responsive support for children and families affected by incarceration. Some of these methods involve creating more responsive structural supports for families, while others offer methods for practitioners to provide one-on-one support to children within established social institutions such as schools. Naser and Visser (2006) pointed out that there are many relational, economic, and time-related costs associated with familial incarceration and recommended the implementation of a range of individualized and structural supports for children and other family members, including efforts to reduce the economic burden on family members, employment supports for family members and those who are formerly incarcerated, family counseling, training programs, housing support, and more. Bernstein (2005) presented a range of proposals for improving structural supports, including reformed community policing and more humane approaches to visiting parents in prisons.

Scholars and practitioners have offered a range of approaches that can guide caregivers, educators, and others to recognize and respond to the needs of children experiencing familial incarceration, while simultaneously countering the negative stigma associated with incarceration. Such supports should be driven by an educated understanding of the common experiences and needs of children who have loved ones who are incarcerated. In this effort, the San Francisco Children of Incarcerated Parents Partnership (see Newby et al., 2005) published an eight-point Bill of Rights, which is used to guide many institutional responses to children. Among them are the rights "to support as I face my parent's incarceration"; "not to be judged, blamed or labeled"; and "to speak with, see and touch my parent." It has been found that while contact and communication between children and parents who are incarcerated is of high importance for child well-being, it is often irregular or nonexistent (L. Davis & Shlafer, 2017). Professional counseling (Lopez & Bhat, 2007; Warren et al., 2019) and connection with teachers (Cavanagh, 2016; Naquin-Eason, 2018; Project Avary, n.d.; Thurman et al., 2018; Youth.gov, n.d.) are shown to provide children with some necessary support. Throughout these various relationships, trauma-informed approaches and pedagogies provide a useful

tool (Souers & Hall, 2016), and picturebooks can act as a resource that might supportively reflect a reader's experience and provide space for engaging in meaningful and supportive conversations (New York Initiative for Children of Incarcerated Parents, n.d.; Wiseman et al., 2019).

Meanwhile, it is important to bear in mind what is already well known within many communities experiencing racialization and/or economic insecurity: Policing and surveillance take place in realms extending well beyond prisons, leading state institutions like child protective services and schools to conduct surveillance on families and young people, and direct racially and economically marginalized people toward institutionalized penalties across the life course (Haskins & Jacobsen, 2017; Nagel, 2018). Thus, it is necessary for teachers, social workers, foster parents, and others to retain a critical lens on their own role, even if often inadvertent, in guiding racialized and/or economically insecure children toward institutionalization in the criminal legal system.

A Note on Researcher Positionality

As researchers, we bring specific points of personal connection to the topic at hand that shape the lenses through which we read and analyze the texts. While conducting the research for this article, Rhiannon Maton taught preservice and practicing teachers at the university level, Breeanna Dexter was completing a graduate degree in inclusive childhood education, and Nicolette McKeon, Emily Urias-Velasquez, and Breanna Washington were undergraduate preservice teachers. All of us have had a range of experiences teaching and working across various age and grade groups in public K–12 schools. We are all cisgender women who consistently strive to raise our consciousness of systems of gendered, racial, and economic violence and how these systems shape our personal experiences in the world. One of us is African American, one is Latinx, and three of us are white. We hold a variety of class identities, ranging from personal backgrounds with significant economic insecurity to middle class. One of us has personal experience of parental incarceration, and several of us have taught students with loved ones who are incarcerated. These various identities and experiences provide us with a range of lenses that inform how we read, analyze, and interpret data, and we believe that our diversity in perspective strengthens our collaborative analysis.

Methodology

Critical content analysis is the primary methodological approach employed in our research. Krippendorff (2019) stated that content analysis is an empirically grounded method that is inferential or predictive in intent as it seeks to identify implicit messages embedded within texts.

Further scholarship argues that critical content analysis involves drawing upon critical theories while analyzing texts, with particular attention to power relations, representational issues, and use of language (Beach et al., 2009). Critical content analysis thus involves examining how explicit and implicit messages within text reinforce particular messages to readers and interact with existing power structures and hierarchies.

TEXT SELECTION

For this critical content analysis of picturebooks addressing familial incarceration, we studied all contemporary English-language picturebooks focused on incarceration that we could physically locate, published 1990 through 2019. We only located and examined books that were picturebooks and addressed the topic of familial incarceration either explicitly in the text and pictures or in strongly suggestive ways. We limited our search to books published in English, whether initially written in English or translated into English. All of the books that we located were published in the United States, with the exception of Mlinac's (2019) *Stardust: We Always Share the Same Sky*, which was published in New Zealand.

In locating books, we first searched for compiled lists of books on familial incarceration that were published by online resources and organizations. Next, we searched Google, Amazon, and the university library online catalog. Our searches used combinations of the following terms: "picturebook," "picture book," "children," "children's literature," "jail," "prison," and "incarceration." We searched for books published from 1990 to 2019 and for ages birth through 10. We located around 25 books in total but were not always able to obtain a copy of books that were reportedly published despite our, and our university library's, best efforts. In total, we were able to physically obtain 19 picturebooks. These books were located either through the university library or the book publisher or were purchased used or new online (see Table 1 for a list of the books examined in this study).

CODING

After locating a physical copy of the 19 picturebooks, we proceeded to critically read and code each book. In the initial stage of our research, all members of the research team read each book and noted demographic information about the child protagonist and the family member who is incarcerated (e.g., gender identity, race, social class, family members) (see Table 1). Next, we engaged in critical content analysis, which facilitated our exploration of incarceration and its depiction through language and visual images. At this stage, we considered words and illustrations as we explored explicit and implicit messages

conveyed about incarceration, who is incarcerated and why, children’s emotional responses and interactions surrounding issues of familial incarceration, and effects of familial incarceration on the child’s life across multiple contexts (e.g., school, home, trips to prison, playground).

Following our individual reading of each book, we then worked together to develop an initial set of a priori codes. At first, these codes emerged from our understanding of the scholarship on penal abolitionism and the impact

of incarceration on children. Then, we coded three books individually and met as a team to compare coding results, resulting in the development of a second draft of codes that emerged from both observations of trends in the literature combined with our understanding of theory and scholarship. Finally, we each individually read and coded all 19 picturebooks, and then met as a group to collaboratively develop a master code sheet. We engaged in ongoing critical and recursive conversation about the themes that we

TABLE 1
Characteristics of the Text Set

Title	Author (Illustrator)	Gender/ Identity/ies of Child Protagonist(s)	Racial Identity/ies of Child Protagonist(s)	Gender Identity of Loved One Incarcerated	Racial Identity of Loved One Incarcerated
<i>Almost Like Visiting</i>	Shannon Ellis (Katrina Tapper)	Boy Girl	Black (2)	Man	Black
<i>Deena Misses Her Mom</i>	Jonae Haynesworth, Jesse Holmes, Layonnie Jones, Kahliya Ruffin (Leslie Jindalay Pyo)	Girl	Black	Woman	Black
<i>Doogie’s Dad</i>	Richard Dyches (Edwin Garcia)	Boy	White	Man	White
<i>Far Apart, Close in Heart</i>	Becky Birtha (Maja Kastelic)	Boys (5) Girls (4)	Black (5), white (1), Asian (1), Latinx (2)	Woman (3) Man (4) Not disclosed (2)	Black, white, Asian, Latinx
<i>Kennedy’s Big Visit</i>	Daphne Brooks	Girl	Black	Man	Black
<i>Knock Knock: My Dad’s Dream for Me</i>	Daniel Beaty (Bryan Collier)	Boy	Black	Man	Black
<i>Kofi’s Mom</i>	Richard Dyches (Edwin Garcia, Roger Sheffer)	Boy	Black	Woman	Black
<i>Missing Daddy</i>	Mariame Kaba (bria royal)	Girl	Black	Man	Black
<i>My Daddy’s in Jail</i>	Anthony Curcio (Anthony Curcio)	Boy	Neither (animals)	Man	Neither (animals)
<i>The Night Dad Went to Jail: What to Expect When Someone You Love Goes to Jail</i>	Melissa Higgins (Wednesday Kirwan)	Boy	Neither (animals)	Man	Neither (animals)
<i>Our Moms</i>	Q. Futrell (Clarissa A. Ferguson)	Boys (2) Girls (2)	Black (1), white (1), Asian (1), Latinx (1)	Woman	Black, white, Asian, Latinx
<i>Stardust: We Always Share the Same Sky</i>	Ivana Mlinac (Porsche Tiavale)	Girl	White	Woman	White
<i>Visiting Day</i>	Jacqueline Woodson (James E. Ransome)	Girl	Black	Man	Black
<i>A Visit to the Big House</i>	Oliver Butterworth (Susan Avishai)	Boy Girl	White (2)	Man	White
<i>Waiting for Daddy</i>	Jennie Harriman, Kylie Ann Flye (Jennie Harriman)	Girl	White	Man	White
<i>Welcome Home: Mommy Gets Out Today</i>	Jamantha Williams Watson	Girl	Black	Woman	Black
<i>What Do I Say About That?: Coping With an Incarcerated Parent</i>	Julia Cook (Anita DuFalla)	Boy	White	Man	White
<i>What Is Jail, Mommy?</i>	Jackie A. Stanglin (Cierra Jade McGuckie)	Girl	White	Man	White
<i>When Dad Was Away</i>	Liz Weir (Karin Littlewood)	Girl	White	Man	White

observed, and continued to refine our coding list throughout the data analysis process. Over time, our codes became more specific and tended to point to consistently recurring themes observed across the texts. At times we went back to refine the codes attributed to previous books in order to ensure that they were consistent with the most updated draft of the master coding sheet. All members of the team read each book at least twice; however, typically we read each book three to six times. We met five times to collectively discuss the books and record our consensus regarding codes for each book on the master code sheet. Following our agreement on codes for the full text set, we organized the codes within overall categories. This article examines the following four categories that emerged from our coding processes: depictions of racial identities of loved ones who are incarcerated, depictions of breaking the law, textual representation of communication modes with family members who are incarcerated, and the range of support systems depicted as available for children. Each category is discussed in depth below.

Findings

Since the scholarly literature points to the significance of race in incarceration trends (see Alexander, 2010; A. Davis, 2003; Maynard, 2017), we begin by critically examining representations of race among the family members incarcerated in this set of picturebooks. Next, we explore how the texts depict breaking the law and the extent to which such depictions might invite a critical lens on mass incarceration. Following this, we explore what modes of communication used for staying in touch are portrayed in the texts, and then end by examining the range of socioemotional support systems available for children.

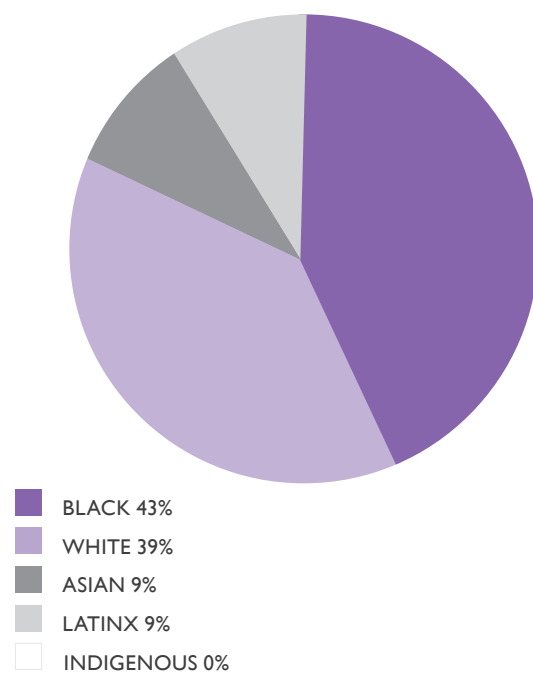
RACIAL IDENTITIES OF LOVED ONES WHO ARE INCARCERATED

We found that the majority of the examined picturebooks tend to represent characters in ways that strongly suggest their racial identities. Because we are interested in reflections of race particularly within the U.S. context, where research has shown that disproportionate numbers of African American and Latinx people are incarcerated (for example, see Alexander, 2010; A. Davis, 2003), we decided to only study books published in the United States in relation to this theme, and thus for this aspect of the study excluded *Stardust*, which was published in New Zealand. We also excluded two picturebooks that featured nonracialized animal characters (*My Daddy's in Jail* [Curcio, 2015] and *The Night Dad Went to Jail* [Higgins, 2013]), leaving 16 picturebooks for this portion of the study. Across the 16 books, we found 21 raced representations of family

members who were incarcerated: Of these, 43% were Black and/or African American, 39% were white, 9% were Asian, and 9% were Latinx. There were no explicit representations of family members incarcerated who were Indigenous (see Figure 1). These numbers are disproportionate with current U.S. incarceration statistics, which indicate that of those currently imprisoned, 38% are Black, 58% are white, 31% are Latinx, under 2% are Asian, and 2% are Indigenous (Federal Bureau of Prisons, 2020a, 2020b). Thus, we found that this body of U.S. literature underrepresents incarceration among people who are white, Indigenous, and Latinx, while overrepresenting incarceration among people who are Black/African American and Asian.

At times, the picturebooks' textual and visual representations of race and culture serve to reinforce existing stereotypes. We observed this phenomenon in several of the books, but found it most explicit and concerning in *My Daddy's in Jail* (Curcio, 2015). The author/illustrator, Anthony Curcio, who is white and spent five years in prison, illustrates stereotypical clothing emulating what is perceived as raced "hood" or "street" clothing: Several of the imprisoned characters, who are presumably Black, are dressed in baggy jeans and loose shirts, wearing bandanas around foreheads and flamboyant jewelry. We believe that this representation portrays an overgeneralized notion that this is typical outer presentation for Black prisoners, and the fact that they are imprisoned can reinforce children's stereotypes about people who are Black.

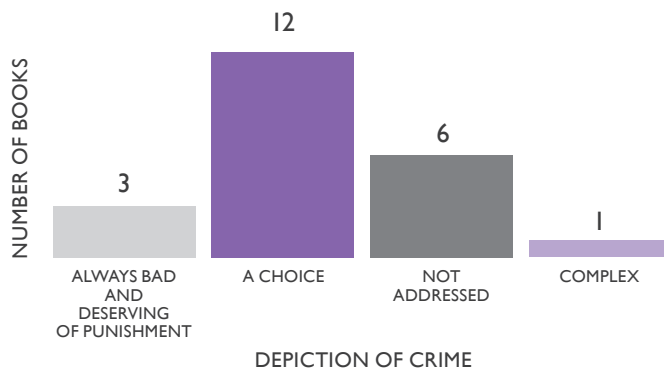
FIGURE 1
Depictions of Racial Identity of Family Members Incarcerated (N = 16)



DEPICTIONS OF BREAKING THE LAW

The literature ranged in representations of breaking the law, including who they implied is “at fault” for imprisonment (see Figure 2). Of the 19 picturebooks, we found that three (16%) represented breaking the law as always bad and deserving of punishment; 12 (63%) portrayed breaking the law as an intentional choice that people make; six (32%) books did not address breaking the law; and just one (5%) book created space for the idea that breaking the law is more complex than an issue of choice or being “bad.” Note that three books represented breaking the law as both always bad and a choice.

FIGURE 2
Depictions of Breaking the Law (N = 19)



Among the books depicting breaking the law as an action that is always bad, we identified an implicit underlying message that lawbreaking is a “bad action” conducted by a “bad” person who is thus deserving of punishment. This message is most explicit in *What Do I Say About That?* (Cook, 2015), where the narrative sets up a contrast between family love versus breaking the law. In discussing the father’s lawbreaking, the text reads: “Why didn’t he love us enough to say NO? Aren’t we worth it to him?” (p. 7). This implies that the father is a bad person because he pursued personal gratification over family love and obligations. We appreciate that some of the books, like *Stardust* (Mlinac, 2019), push back on such narratives by emphasizing that mutual love is far more important than external negative judgments about a family member who is incarcerated.

We found that the majority of books advance the idea that breaking the law is an individual choice resulting from poor decision-making. *Our Moms* (Futrell, 2015) narrates that the mothers of the children in the book may have associated themselves with the wrong people or made a “bad” choice leading to their incarceration. Meanwhile, this notion is juxtaposed with the idea that even though the mothers may have made “bad choices,” the mothers do not love their children any less. Illustrations in *What Do I Say About That?* (Cook, 2015) graphically portray two

life paths for the protagonist child: one path labeled the “right way” that is directed toward a graduation cap and what appears to be a factory, and a second path labeled the “wrong way” toward handcuffs, pills, and a bottle of beer. Here, the reader might discern that the child is charged with making individual decisions that will lead to predictable life results. While this contrast was set up most explicitly in this text, across the body of texts we found that breaking the law is most frequently associated with choice and individual decision-making.

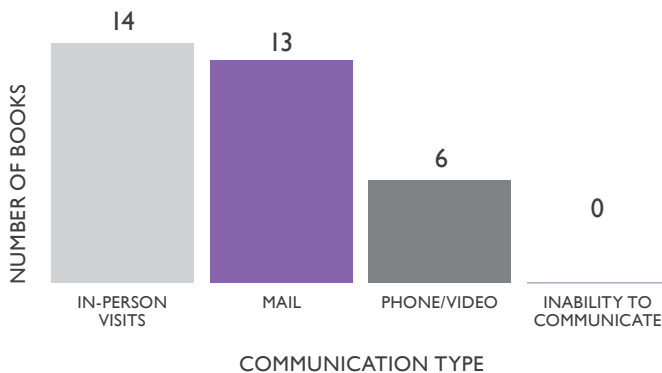
A few books did not explicitly discuss reasons for the family member’s incarceration. In some of this literature, such as *Knock Knock: My Dad’s Dream for Me* (Beaty, 2013), familial incarceration is inferred rather than explicitly mentioned (for more on incarceration inferences in this text, see Bird, 2013; Smith, 2013). Here, a boy misses his father and reflects upon the things he is missing out on due to his father being “away.” However, the book is not transparent with the readers as to why the father is not with the child. The son receives a letter from his father that states, “As long as you become your best, the best of me still lives in you” (Beaty, 2013). The reader can infer that the father is perhaps incarcerated. *Visiting Day* (Woodson, 2015) similarly does not address reasons for incarceration, and the author’s decision not to discuss lawbreaking appears to be an intentional one that enables the book to sidestep questions about whether the parent has done something “wrong”—or not. Books that lack discussion of breaking the law may leave it up to the reader to interpret why a family member is incarcerated and allow them to focus on other aspects associated with incarceration instead, such as a child’s emotions or experiences in school.

Breaking the law was represented in complex ways in just one book in this body of literature. To our research team, complexity meant that there was some implication or space for the idea that the reasons for incarceration may be complex, rather than a simplistic issue of “choice” or the narrative that prison is a “bad place” for “bad people.” While some of the 19 books, including *Almost Like Visiting* (Ellis, 2016) and *Far Apart, Close in Heart* (Birtha, 2017), did not directly assign blame, they still implied that lawbreaking is a choice and did not necessarily create space for deep consideration of the idea that there are systemic issues at play. The book that creates the most room for critical thinking about reasons for incarceration is penal abolition activist Mariame Kaba’s *Missing Daddy* (2018). Here, a young child asks her grandmother why her father is incarcerated, and the grandmother responds, “Baby, the reasons are many.” We believe that this picturebook creates space for readers to critically inquire into, and make sense of, the complex network of systemic and structural factors surrounding penal imprisonment.

COMMUNICATION WITH FAMILY MEMBERS WHO ARE INCARCERATED

Maintaining contact with a family member who is incarcerated is often a major concern for children (Bernstein, 2005), and we observed that this body of picturebooks portrays a range of communication modes through which children might connect with their loved one who is incarcerated. In general, we found that the picturebooks tended to represent communication between children and their family member who is incarcerated as a given, albeit an action that can take varied forms (see Figure 3). Of the picturebooks under study, 14 (78%) showed children visiting the family member in prison, 13 (72%) addressed communication through mail via letters or hand-drawn pictures, and six (33%) showed children using technologies like telephones or videos. None addressed the experiences of children who are unable to communicate with family members who are incarcerated. Note that we calculated these statistics based on 18 books rather than the full 19 examined in this study because *Welcome Home: Mommy Gets out Today* (Watson, 2015) portrays a mother reentering society rather than the challenges experienced during incarceration. Further note that individual books often mentioned more than one method of communication, and this is reflected in our statistics.

FIGURE 3
Depictions of Communication With Family Members Incarcerated ($N = 18$)



We found that a strong majority of the books depict writing letters and mailing hand-drawn pictures as a method of staying in touch. In *Doogie's Dad* (Dyches, 2016), the child protagonist's father, who is incarcerated, asks his son to draw and mail a picture so he could "put it by his new bed" (p. 14). In response, Doogie draws a euphoric picture of himself holding hands with his parents and sister on a sunny day. Several books also encourage older children to write letters to their parents. In *Deena Misses Her Mom* (Haynesworth et al., 2017), Deena reveals a great deal of anger and sadness connected with her

mom's incarceration, but when she talks with her mother via video chat, her mother asks her to write letters to stay in touch. The story ends with Deena writing a letter to her mother to express the love that she feels.

Almost Like Visiting (Ellis, 2016) pays concerted attention to a range of communication modes between children and their loved ones. It is also one of only two books that depict video communication, with the child saying: "We go to the video visiting building one time a month to see him. Sometimes we see him in person but it is really far. I love in person visits, but video visiting is a great way to see my Dad in between" (p. 18). *Deena Misses Her Mom* (Haynesworth et al., 2017) similarly pays significant attention to the experiences of children who communicate with their loved ones through phone or video chat because they are too young to write a letter or the jail is far away.

Many of the picturebooks discuss visitation as a central topic and seek to prepare children for what to expect when visiting their loved one in prison. Most of the books in our study address visitation in some capacity, although they tend to vary in their focus. Representations of physical touch exist in a range in such depictions: Some picturebooks show a sense of freedom and choice while a child visits their loved one, while others make it clear that visitation only occurs within one room of the prison, and within the parameters of strict rules. *Almost Like Visiting* (Ellis, 2016) and *The Night Dad Went to Jail* (Higgins, 2013) are the only books that feature glass barriers during in-person visits at the prison. *Kennedy's Big Visit* (Brooks, 2015) and *Far Apart, Close in Heart* (Birtha, 2017) illustrate the possibility of cuddling, singing, and playing together. In *What Is Jail, Mommy?* (Stanglin, 2006), the mother and daughter sit in a brick room with tables, waiting for the father: "You can sit at the little table until our visiting time is up. Remember the rules allow us a thirty minute visit."

Because interactions between the individual who is incarcerated and children vary depending on the prison, sentence, and other factors, we believe it is positive that a range of communication possibilities are presented across the texts. However, none of the books allude to a complete lack of contact or communication between children and a loved one who is incarcerated. In fact, at times the books explicitly assert that all children have the opportunity to see their family member while incarcerated. In *Almost Like Visiting* (Ellis, 2016), the young child Jeremiah states, "Not all of us with parents in prison get to see them on the computer, but we all get to see them."

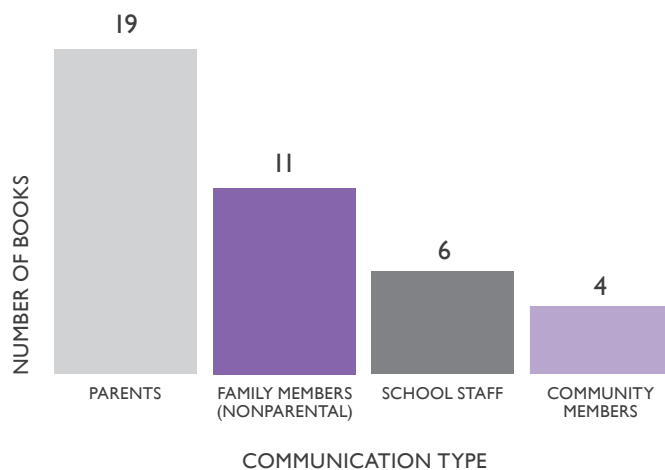
Lastly, it is worth noting that some children choose not to communicate with their loved one at all, and the books in our study fail to represent the experiences and emotions of these children. There are some books, like *Welcome Home* (Watson, 2015), that depict children who

have hesitations about communicating with their family member who is or has been incarcerated, yet in these books we found that the child characters always experience a sense of “forgiveness” for the family member and eventually choose to communicate.

REPRESENTATIONS OF SUPPORT SYSTEMS FOR CHILDREN

The picturebooks consistently portray positive available support systems for children with a loved one who is incarcerated. We define a support system as a network of people who provide emotional, social, and/or practical support that can help children understand their experiences and work through emotions, provide access to resources, and let children know they are loved and not alone. Depictions of diverse arrangements of support systems can assist readers in becoming aware of those available to them. Among the picturebooks, parents are represented as a source of support in 19 (100%); family members who are not parents (e.g., aunts, siblings, grandparents) are represented as a significant source of support in 11 (58%); school staff such as teachers, counselors, or social workers are represented as a source of support in six (32%); and community members or neighbors are shown to be of support to children in four (21%) (see Figure 4). Note that some picturebooks include two or more support systems, and this is reflected in the statistics above and in Figure 4.

FIGURE 4
Depictions of Support Systems for Children (N = 19)



It is notable that birth parents appear as a source of support in all of the picturebooks. Many of the books feature a parent who lives with the child and who offers support by answering questions, helping them visit their parent who is incarcerated, and making the child feel more comfortable with their new family dynamic. In *What Is Jail, Mommy?* (Stanglin, 2006), a little girl asks her mother questions about jail and how it works. Her mother supports her by answering the questions and providing a clear

explanation of jail. At times, parents provide some degree of support while they are themselves incarcerated, such as in the case of *Knock Knock* (Beaty, 2013), *Stardust* (Mlinac, 2019), and *Waiting for Daddy* (Harriman & Flye, 2011).

Relatives who are not parents also play occasional roles as support systems in the books. In *Waiting for Daddy* (Harriman & Flye, 2011), Ann plays with her aunt: “They put on puppet shows, practiced yoga, played instruments, and wrote stories.” In *Visiting Day* (Woodson, 2015), the child protagonist lives, and presumably has a close relationship, with her grandmother.

In many cases, children are placed with guardians while experiencing familial incarceration, yet this experience is largely underrepresented in the literature. *Far Apart, Close in Heart* (Birtha, 2017) is the only text that portrays a foster family dynamic. Here, experiences in the foster care system are acknowledged as follows: “Juana tells her foster mother how upset she is with her family scattered all over. Her foster mother lets Juana call each of her siblings.” We were surprised at this general underrepresentation, given the frequency of foster care placement in the lives of many children with parents who are incarcerated. Similarly, there was little representation of diverse family structures in the picturebooks, including only occasional implied references to LGBTQ+ families.

There was some representation of school in the texts, with teachers, school social workers and counselors, and peers/friends at times positioned as members of children’s support systems. For example, in *Missing Daddy* (Kaba, 2018), school staff are portrayed as playing an active role in supporting the young girl: “At school, I talk to the counselor, Ms. Parker. I guess it helps me to feel a little bit better. She asks me a lot of questions about my Daddy in prison. Sometimes I don’t want to speak, so I talk about my ballet lesson.” Here the child interprets her school counselor as supportive, and the counselor provides space for her to speak—or not—about her concerns regarding her parent who is incarcerated. Peers and friends were also positioned as a source of emotional support in many of the books.

Community members and neighbors were shown to provide meaningful support to children in a small number of the books. In *Welcome Home* (Watson, 2015), the family’s pastor attends the family celebrations for the return of a mother from prison. We were particularly drawn to the beautiful illustrations and text of *Visiting Day* (Woodson, 2015), which presents a moving portrayal of how people can come together when facing high rates of incarceration within a given community or neighborhood. Here, the child and her grandmother bring gifts to prison on behalf of a neighbor whose child has also been incarcerated. And while on the bus traveling to the prison, the community is

shown as bonding tightly together through sharing food: “And we’re all passing around fried chicken, cornbread, and thick slices of sweet potato pie” (Woodson, 2015). We believe that such positive portrayals of community bonding can serve to nurture a feeling that “we are all in this together” and create a sense of belonging for children as they make sense of, and live through, experiences of familial incarceration.

Discussion

In our examination of this body of picturebooks through a penal abolitionist lens, we find that it presents a mixture of what we view as positive and problematic characteristics. Positive characteristics tend to center on predicting, portraying, and educating readers about what experiences children might encounter when a loved one is incarcerated. As a whole, the body of literature takes care to depict what support systems a child might draw upon for socioemotional support, and what communication with a loved one might look and feel like through various modes, including visitation in prison. In our view, this body of picturebooks offers sound reflection of children’s common experiences with communication and available support systems. We believe that the books may act as a good resource for parents or guardians, grandparents, social workers, teachers, and others to use when talking with children about what they can expect when visiting a loved one in prison, staying in touch, or seeking socioemotional support from peers and/or adults.

We have several concerns about this body of literature. We are concerned that it advances racist ideological trends. As a reminder, across the text set 43% of the family members who were depicted as imprisoned in the books were Black, compared with just 38% of the actual U.S. prison population. On the one hand, while we appreciate that the body of literature has sought to represent African Americans’ experiences with the criminal legal system, on the other hand we are concerned that raced overrepresentation can guide readers toward harmful stereotypes about who is imprisoned and why. We also observed that the body of literature does not acknowledge that the reason why African Americans have disproportionate interaction with the U.S. criminal legal system is because laws are written and enforced in ways that lead Black people to be policed at higher rates than white people (Alexander, 2010; A. Davis, 2003). Meanwhile, it was concerning to us that there was insufficient representation of Latinx and Indigenous family members experiencing incarceration, as these are populations that are incarcerated at disproportionate rates in traditional prisons as well as U.S. detention camps.

The picturebooks tend to point fingers at people

who are incarcerated for their own incarceration without nurturing questions about, or advancing critical understanding of, the systemic factors leading to mass incarceration. In the U.S. context, where there are scarce resources publicly distributed through a social safety net, it is not reasonable to claim that crime committed due to economic insecurity is always a “choice” (A. Davis, 2003; McLeod, 2015). There is little space in this body of books for children and their caregivers to raise questions or think together about the broader raced and classed manifestations of policy, and the extent to which the “justice system” is—or is not—in fact just. Taken as a whole, this body of literature lacks the important structural critiques advanced by current critical scholars and the Black Lives Matter (Taylor, 2016) and penal abolitionist movements (see Alexander, 2010; Coyle & Nagel, 2022; A. Davis, 2003; Kaba, 2020; McLeod, 2015). We are concerned that when books explicitly or implicitly depict breaking the law as a poor individual choice that is ultimately deserving of punishment and divorced from systemic factors, children may internalize these same feelings and project them toward themselves and/or their loved one(s). Further, the books miss an opportunity for guiding important inquiry and critical analysis.

Picturebook illustrations and text at times perpetuate negative stereotypes about particular racial and cultural groups. At times, the texts overgeneralize groups of people, which creates stereotypes and conditions readers to make quick judgments about the character and competence of people in particular racial groups (Rosbach, 2020). Alongside Toni Morrison (1992), we believe that such portrayals serve to limit the literary imagination in service of broader hegemonic power structures. Further, such portrayals advance a false perception of reality among young readers. We are also concerned that some groups were chronically underrepresented across this body of literature, as noted in the findings section, and are particularly concerned about the general lack of representation of foster parents and families.

We had four main concerns regarding the depiction of communication across the texts. First, while we appreciated that there were thoughtful portrayals of a range of communication modes utilized by children to communicate with a loved one who is incarcerated, we observed that there was an assumption across the texts that children always have the opportunity to communicate with a loved one who is incarcerated. Unfortunately, we are all too aware that not every child has the ability to communicate with a loved one who is incarcerated due to a range of possible reasons, and we are concerned that the books fail to reflect the experiences of many children. Second, this body of texts largely excludes the

experiences of children who are not documented citizens. Children who are undocumented may experience an inability to visit in person or otherwise communicate with a family member who is incarcerated due to the lack of documentation among children or their caregivers, fear of surveillance, and/or the forced surrender of documents to prison officials. Third, we know from personal experience that not all children always desire to communicate with a family member who is incarcerated. We are concerned that for the books to display otherwise may invalidate the emotions of some young readers. Finally, depictions of children “forgiving” their parent for incarceration tend to locate the fault of incarceration squarely in the hands of the person who is incarcerated while failing to draw critical attention to the systemic factors at play that led to imprisonment.

As mentioned previously, we believe that the texts largely did a thoughtful job of depicting children’s experience accessing support systems among peers and adults. However, we simultaneously implore readers to consider Nagel’s (2018) assertion that social welfare institutions (including public schools) can at times act as gatekeepers to broader systems of policing and surveillance over children and their families. In other words, not all school personnel necessarily have children’s best interests at heart, consciously or otherwise. And, while we think that picturebooks should not serve to incite fear among children, we simultaneously encourage adult readers to maintain a critical eye on the systemic inequities often embedded within schools and other institutions.

In a nation where one in 28 children currently has a parent who is imprisoned, combined with countless additional children facing the incarceration of other family members, we believe it vital that the canon of picturebooks depicts the experiences of those with parents and other loved ones who are incarcerated.

Conclusion

In a nation where one in 28 children currently has a parent who is imprisoned, combined with countless additional children facing the incarceration of other family members, we believe it vital that the canon of picturebooks depicts the experiences of those with parents and other loved ones who are incarcerated. Children with loved ones

who are incarcerated can face myriad challenges in their home and school lives, and picturebooks offer necessary windows and doors (Bishop, 1990) through which such experiences might be reflected, altered, and repositioned, and through which new insights might emerge. We examined this body of picturebooks through a penal abolitionist lens, and our analysis finds that this body of books presents a mixture of positive and problematic trends in its depictions of familial incarceration.

Taken as a whole, the body of literature offers helpful insight into the daily lives and experiences of children with loved ones who are incarcerated. Many of the books present useful perspectives on how children might expect to communicate with their loved one, common experiences encountered during visitation at a prison, and reminders about the importance of love for a family member who is incarcerated and from whom one might seek care and support. Meanwhile, and especially when read through a penal abolitionist lens, we have significant concern that, taken as a whole, the picturebooks support a problematic “carceral logic” (Coyle & Nagel, 2022) that positions punishment as a “just” and “natural” response to lawbreaking without acknowledging the ubiquity of lawbreaking in human behavior, the exorbitantly and unnecessary high rates of criminalization in the United States (Alexander, 2010; Enns, 2016), or the ways in which the criminal legal system targets particular populations of people, including BIPOC and people experiencing economic insecurity (Alexander, 2010; A. Davis, 2003). Our investigation reveals that this body of literature must continue to grow in order to represent the full breadth of common experiences among children with loved ones who are incarcerated.

Despite these critiques, we would like to restate the importance of the themes that are represented in this body of literature. Bishop (1990) pointed out: “When children cannot find themselves reflected in the books they read, or when the images they see are distorted, negative, or laughable, they learn a powerful lesson about how they are devalued in the society of which they are a part” (p. ix). Children with loved ones who are incarcerated can benefit from windows and mirrors presenting reflections and new images of themselves and the world. Such picturebooks provide a good launching point for discussing what visitation with a family member at a prison will look and feel like, the sometimes difficult range of emotions they might feel in response to incarceration, or the economic and emotional difficulties that their caregivers experience as a result of the incarceration. We believe there is great value in readers seeing their lived experiences reflected in the literature and strongly encourage both the continued development of this body of literature in moving forward and the

informed use of such literature when reading and connecting with young people who have been personally affected by familial incarceration.

We encourage educators, librarians, and social workers to carefully review and assess books prior to sharing them with children. They should assess whether the books are a good match for the particular populations of young readers that they serve, with attentive consideration to their lived experiences, their level of consciousness and maturity, and their current knowledge about and exposure to what incarceration is and the effects it may have. We recommend that professionals might prompt children to read critically through posing questions such as these: Which races are represented, and among which characters? Is breaking the law always a choice? What is the purpose of punishment? Do children always have the chance to visit with their family members in prison? Is it fair that this child is so far away from their mom? These and other questions can help to encourage children to build more compassion toward their peers and families with members who are incarcerated, while also serving to educate children about the real impact of prisons on their peers and society. ▣

Rhiannon M. Maton, PhD, is an associate professor at the State University of New York at Cortland. Her research examines how educators can support

students facing social and economic marginalization, and she has published her research in a range of books and journals, including Curriculum Inquiry, Journal of Educational Change, and Gender, Work and Organization. Email: rhiannon.maton@cortland.edu

Breeanna Dexter is a special education teacher in the Rush-Henrietta Central School District. She teaches a life skills curriculum to students with severe and multiple disabilities. She advocates for the supports and services students need to receive their education within their home district. Email: breeanna.dexter@gmail.com

Nicolette McKeon is a teacher assistant in a special education classroom in the Commack School District. She has worked in a variety of special education settings and is passionate about teaching diverse student populations, as well as fostering their love of learning. Email: nmckeon2467@gmail.com

Emily Urias-Velasquez is a 2022 State University of New York at Cortland graduate, where she studied early childhood / childhood education and Spanish. Her passion is to advocate for those who are unable to find their voice. Email: emilyvelasquez@icloud.com

Breanna Washington is a general education teacher in the Elmont Union Free School District. She teaches all comprehensive subjects, such as math, English language arts, science, and social studies. As a teacher of color in a Title I school district, she strives to represent the diversity and funds of knowledge that all students contribute to academic and nonacademic spaces. Email: breanna.washington78@gmail.com

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