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Correctional Education and Reintegration: A Qualitative Study of Young Ex-Offenders in Cape Flats

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Abstract: The transition from correctional service to life in the community can be very challenging for young ex-offenders because they often lack the skills and knowledge they need to function successfully in society. This exploratory study aimed to explore whether the educational opportunities provided in correctional services really help young ex-offenders make a successful transition back into society. The study adopted a qualitative research approach, interviewing a group of 20 young ex-offenders aged 18 to 35 from the Cape Flats region. The data from the interviews were analysed through thematic analysis. The study found that correctional education, particularly programmes focused on mental health, counselling and life skills, significantly improved the mental well-being and self-efficacy of young ex-offenders, aiding their successful reintegration into society. These programmes also emphasised moral education, fostering harmonious coexistence with community members' post-release. This study recommends a revolutionary pedagogical approach to correctional education aiming at comprehensive education of young offenders. This pedagogy should use modern digital technologies, allowing correctional educators to undertake pre-attendance assessments of each offender's learning preferences, inclinations as well as individual aptitudes and limitations. This method facilitates the learning of basic education required for successful reintegration of young offenders into society.

Keywords: correctional education; societal reintegration; young ex-offenders; transition; incarceration

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1. Introduction

Correctional education has emerged globally as a vital mechanism for supporting the reintegration of incarcerated young people into society. In countries such as Denmark and Belgium, access to high-quality postsecondary education within correctional facilities is regarded as essential for facilitating a smooth transition from confinement to societal engagement (UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning, 2021). Beyond academic instruction, correctional education programmes aim to foster civic responsibility, equipping young offenders with the skills and values necessary to contribute meaningfully to their communities upon release (Esperian, 2010). Despite substantial investment in correctional education globally, challenges persist. Previous studies reveal persistent issues of truancy, absenteeism, and disengagement among young offenders, even where educational opportunities are provided (Wang et al., 2005; Mallett, 2016; Sedlak & Bruce, 2010). These problems raise questions about the effectiveness of correctional education in achieving its intended outcomes.

In South Africa, the government has prioritised youth development since the country's democratic transition in 1994, yet many young people continue to face socioeconomic hardships that increase their risk of incarceration (Khan & Singh, 2014; Phillips, 2019). Factors

such as lack of parental support, association with deviant peers, and gang involvement contribute significantly to youth offending (Chauke & Malatji, 2021). Although the South African legislative framework including the 2004 White Paper on Corrections and Section 29(1) of the Constitution emphasises rehabilitation through education, young ex-offenders often struggle with reintegration into mainstream society (Vandala, 2019; Hadebe, 2021). International scholars (Roessger et al., 2021; Wallace & Wang, 2020; Erickson, 2018; Fazel & Baillargeon, 2011; Shabangu, 2021) argue that correctional education has a positive and holistic impact on young ex-offenders, which is essential for successful societal reintegration. These studies emphasise that by addressing cognitive, emotional, and practical skills development, correctional education supports a smoother transition from incarceration to community life. In the South African context, researchers such as Quan-Baffour and Zawada (2012), Johnson (2015), and Vandala (2018) highlight the role of correctional education programmes in contributing to the economic development of young ex-offenders. They argue that equipping ex-offenders with vocational and entrepreneurial skills significantly enhances their employability and economic independence, thereby facilitating their reintegration into society and reducing recidivism.

This study was undertaken within the Cape Flats region of South Africa's Western Cape province, focusing specifically on the communities of Gugulethu, Langa, and Khayelitsha. The Cape Flats represents a historically marginalised area shaped by forced removals during the apartheid era, and is marked today by high rates of unemployment, poverty, gang-related violence, and youth crime (Bowers Du Toit, 2014; De Wet, 2016). Correctional education in South Africa is offered to incarcerated individuals with the aim of promoting rehabilitation, skill development, and successful reintegration into society. Programmes typically include basic literacy education, vocational skills training, counselling, and social skills development. Within the Cape Flats context, correctional education often seeks to address the social and economic vulnerabilities that predispose young people to criminal behaviour. The correctional education programme in South Africa is implemented in three categories: adult basic education and training (ABET), which covers Grades 1 to 10; secondary education, which includes Grades 11 and 12 and focuses on life skills, occupational and entrepreneurial skills training, and computer-based training; and tertiary education, which focuses on post-secondary educational programmes. However, the participants in this study were involved in the first and second categories of correctional education while in correctional facilities. Mafilika and Marongwe (2024) argue that despite the positive impact correctional education has on offenders, these programmes have been suffering due to a variety of challenges, including poor investment from the government in both capital and human resources. In addition, the unprofessional conduct of correctional services staff towards offenders' education further hampers the effectiveness of these programmes. This study focused specifically on young ex-offenders who participated in literacy, counselling, skills development, and social skills development programmes while incarcerated. It explored whether these educational interventions contributed meaningfully to their reintegration into society, within the unique socio-economic environment of the Cape Flats.

Existing research has largely focused on the financial implications and policy frameworks of correctional education (Tonseth et al., 2019; Johnson, 2015). But has paid no attention to the lived experiences and perspectives of young ex-offenders themselves whether the educational opportunities provided within correctional services meaningfully facilitate offenders' successful reintegration into society particularly in Cape Flats, South Africa, there is a notable gap in understanding whether the education provided within correctional facilities effectively supports successful young people reintegration after release. This study addresses that gap by exploring the narratives of young ex-offenders, aged 14 to 35, regarding their experiences with correctional education and its impact on

their reintegration into society. By centering their voices, this research aims to develop a more responsive pedagogical framework for correctional education, contributing to both theory and practice in the rehabilitation of young offenders.

Literature Review on Correctional Education and Successful Transition from Incarceration to Societal Reintegration

Correctional education is critical in the context of a developing country like South Africa because it teaches crucial skills to offenders, allowing them to improve their chances of reintegration into society (Ravele, 2022). Young ex-offenders, in particular, have a heightened appreciation of the importance of familial relationships upon their release, a witness to the focus placed on family reunification within correctional education (Tomita & Ungureanu, 2021). According to a study conducted in London, participation in correctional education fosters a significant increase in self-confidence and self-esteem among young offenders, allowing them to engage in additional educational pursuits and, as a result, enabling following their release employment prospects (Rogers et al., 2014).

Furthermore, Honorato (2022) observes that correctional education improves juvenile offenders' ethical awareness, inventiveness, receptivity and societal participation. As a result, these people have a higher chance of successfully reintegrating into society by taking an active role in social activities. In Zambia, young people in correctional service receive vocational literacy training through correctional education, preparing them to lead productive lives after they are released (Kakupaa & Mulenga, 2021). Notably, young ex-offenders who take advantage of educational possibilities in correctional settings report heightened self-awareness, a transforming experience that aids their reintegration into society (Behan, 2014).

Hawley et al. (2013) found that young ex-offenders who participated in correctional education had a lower predisposition for recidivism after release and a better ability for societal reintegration. This is due to the cultivation of self-reflective capacities, which is a critical component of their effective reintegration. Correctional education, by emphasising personal development, provides young offenders with the tools they need to conduct meaningful lives within the familial and communal context (Szifris, 2018).

Participation in educational programmes while incarcerated provides young offenders with a feeling of purpose, acting as a deterrent to recidivism upon release (Miner-Romanoff, 2016). Ex-offenders benefit from more self-determination and accountability within the limits of correctional education. Following that, upon re-entry into society, they are responsible for admitting their mistakes and requesting forgiveness from both victims and the greater societal framework (Tonseth et al., 2019). In Ireland, young offenders are educated in life values while in correctional service, establishing the virtue of self-respect in them. This core knowledge facilitates their reintegration into society (O'Grady, 2017). According to Nichols (2016), the focus of correctional education should be employment-oriented, helping young ex-offenders to access dignified vocations following release. Correctional education's vocational training enables ex-offenders to achieve independence and self-sufficiency. A related study by Quan-Baffour and Zawada (2012) highlights the critical importance of correctional education in preparing offenders for entrepreneurial ventures upon release, giving them the skill set needed to start their own firms.

Cai et al. (2019) argue that offenders who lack core reading, technology and numeracy skills upon release face considerable barriers to successful reintegration into society, increasing the probability of recidivism. As a result, rehabilitation through education while incarcerated becomes a key requirement for offenders of all ages. Correctional education provides them with the skills needed to resist the attraction of criminality, easing their re-entry into society after release (Duwe, 2018). Those who participate in educational programmes while incarcerated use their newly gained information to pursue further

educational attainment, hence improving their employability (Delaney & Smith, 2018). Hanushek et al. (2013) stress that correctional education plays an important role in the formation of civic engagement and healthy behaviour among young offenders, which helps them to reintegrate into society.

Ward and Stewart's Good Lives Model Theory, developed in 2003, has been used previous studies as a theoretical framework that shows the relationship between correctional education and positive societal reintegration. This theory proposes a strengths-based approach to rehabilitation, arguing that individuals have basic primary human needs that must be met for them to live pro-social lives. Failure to achieve these basic needs or facing substantial life obstacles increases the likelihood of engaging in criminal behaviour (Ward & Stewart, 2003). In addition, the Good Lives Model Theory advocates for educational opportunities within correctional service, arguing that such interventions are critical in preventing post-release recidivism. These educational efforts are intended to contribute significantly to offenders' personal, social and economic progress, hence helping them achieve the acquisition of essential human goods (Ward & Brown, 2004). The current study is to determine the effectiveness of educational programmes within correctional facilities in facilitating young ex-offenders to successfully transition from detention to reintegration into society. This study proposes that a correctional education pedagogy imbued with an emphasis on primary human goods will result in a favourable transition for young ex-offenders, in accordance with the tenets of the Good Lives Model Theory. This strategy is expected to satisfy their diverse developmental requirements, which include social, psychological, spiritual and cognitive elements, paving the way for effective societal reintegration. The Good Lives Model (GLM) posits that correctional education programmes should equip offenders with the necessary skills and knowledge to fulfil their fundamental human needs and reintegrate meaningfully into mainstream society. According to Vandala (2019), the GLM is particularly suitable for examining correctional education's impact on reintegration, as it foregrounds human rights and prioritises offenders' primary life goals in the rehabilitation process. By centering educational interventions around these human needs, correctional education becomes a transformative tool, enabling young ex-offenders to acquire vital life and vocational skills that support their successful reintegration into society.

2. Materials and Methods

2.1. The Research Approach

This study used a qualitative research approach within the interpretivism paradigm to investigate whether young ex-offenders' experiences in correctional service truly facilitated their successful transition from incarceration to societal reintegration. Ormston et al. (2014) defined the qualitative approach as a methodological position generally adopted by social scientists with the objective of generating complete and complex insights from people within their unique social contexts. This form of inquiry was particularly advantageous due to the participants' unique perspectives on specific occurrences, providing a strong avenue for the discovery of profound insights. Given the objectives of this study, the qualitative approach was an excellent choice as it allowed for the collection of diverse viewpoints from young people with a history of involvement in unlawful activities. The adoption of the interpretive paradigm was of critical importance in the study. This paradigm asserted that solitary and unambiguous facts are elusive and instead proposed that people have numerous and varied interpretations of every given event. As a result, using this paradigm allowed the study to examine the various points of view held by participants, resulting in a matrix of separate truths.

2.2. Population and Sampling

For this study, the population consisted of young ex-offenders aged 18 to 35. The participants in the study had previously participated in correctional education while confined in the Cape Flats. All participants who participated in this study are based in Cape Flats area, Western Cape Province, South Africa. Of the participants, ten spent six years, five had spent four years, and three had spent two years in correctional facilities, while the remaining two spent one year and six months. They had been convicted of various criminal activities, including housebreaking, assault, physical abuse, and gang violence. At the time of the study, 18 participants had been released for more than two years, while two had been released approximately one year prior to participating in the research. The sample size of 20 young ex-offenders was determined by purposive and snowball sampling. These young ex-offenders had participated in correctional education content as part of their rehabilitation. Purposive sampling was used to select individuals based on their abilities, allowing the researcher to make sound judgments when selecting participants who matched the essential requirements. Participants in this study were all young ex-offenders who had participated in correctional education while incarcerated. Some of these young ex-offenders were recruited through voluntary work with youth social organisations. Therefore, two youth social organisations served as gatekeepers in purposively sampling the participants. Using snowball sampling, the identified individuals referred the researcher to another individual who met the criteria for participation in the study. To be eligible for the study, individuals had to be between the ages of 18 and 35, live on the Cape Flats and have previously been incarcerated and engaged in correctional education at correctional service. Youth non-profit organisations that worked with young ex-offenders were the first to contact the people who were sampled through purposive sampling. Participants who were not young ex-offenders and who also took part in the correctional education programme while detained were barred from participating.

2.3. Data Collection

Semi-structured interviews were utilised to collect data through a series of open-ended questions to comprehend the participants' experiences with the subject under review. This data collection strategy was critical because it enabled the researcher to carefully listen to the participants. Furthermore, semi-structured interviews were important because they allowed the researcher to explore responses from participants who might have struggled to articulate themselves during the interview. To gather information, telephone interviews and Microsoft Teams meetings were used. For individuals who did not have the Microsoft Teams app on their phones, the phone interview lasted 45 min. A Microsoft Teams conference was held for 45 min with individuals who had the app on their electronic devices. Because Microsoft Teams could be costly, the researcher purchased data for the participants to provide them with internet access. The researcher used phone interviews and the Microsoft Teams app to avoid travel costs, as the participants were located in provinces far from the researcher's place of residence. The approximate distance between the researcher province (Limpopo Province) and the participants (Western Province) is around 1500 to 1700 km (930 to 1060 miles). These methods made it easier for the researcher to obtain responses from the participants. The following open-ended questions were asked during the interview:

- In what ways do you reckon correctional education in general affected your personal and social growth, allowing you to successfully transition from incarceration to society reintegration?
- To what extent do educational programmes in correctional facilities align with the needs and aspirations of incarcerated individuals for post-release success?

- What is the relationship between participation in educational programmes during incarceration and an individual's self-efficacy, motivation, and confidence in pursuing a law-abiding life post-release?
- To what extent do post-release support systems and opportunities (e.g., job placement services, mentoring programmes) complement the impact of educational programs in facilitating successful reintegration?

2.4. Data Analysis

Thematic analysis was used to examine the data. Thematic analysis is a type of data analysis used in qualitative research that allows researchers to systematically analyse complex data sets by identifying themes (Clarke & Braun, 2014). In this study, the researcher employed thematic analysis to aid in the search for themes that captured the narratives emerging from the participants' responses throughout the interviews. Thematic analysis is a technique that teaches the mechanics of coding and evaluating qualitative data (Braun & Clarke, 2012). Braun and Clarke (2006) established a six-phase process for thematic analysis, which was used in this study.

Phase 1: Familiarisation with the Data: In this phase, I began by acquainting myself with the data, which helped me become aware of the various themes that emerged from the data set. I read the data set several times to ensure that I did not overlook any critical information. I highlighted relevant material that answered the research questions as I studied the data collection. After this, I proceeded to the next stage. Phase 2: Generating Initial Codes: In this phase, I aimed to develop the initial codes; this process required a thorough rereading of the transcripts and coding of the entire data set. I utilised notes as the initial coding technique for the entire data set and patterns began to emerge. Phase 3: Finding Themes: In this phase, I listed all the themes found in the data collection that were relevant to and answered the research question. I made a list of the codes and wrote them down on a separate piece of paper before organising them into thematic piles that reflected the relationship between codes and themes. Phase 4: Theme Review: At this point, all the themes and sub-themes detected in the data collection were grouped together. I ensured that all the themes and sub-themes were consistent and coherent. Themes unrelated to the study's goals were excluded. I refined the themes by reading all the primary themes and sub-themes, codes and excerpts, paying close attention to the narrative behind each theme to comprehend its meaning. After this, I organised all the themes and sub-themes into a cohesive and consistent account and named them accordingly. Phase 6: Report Writing: At this point, I wrote down the findings in a report.

2.5. Ethical Considerations

The study took ethical considerations into account. The study was approved by the University of South Africa's College of Education's Research Ethics Committee, with reference number 2023/10/11/90501543/18/AM. To obtain permission to interview the young ex-offenders, a letter was addressed to the youth-serving organisations that worked with them. The participants were informed of the study's goal and their rights after permission to interview them was granted. Participants completed a consent form once they agreed to participate in the study. Other ethical considerations, such as confidentiality, privacy and anonymity, were strictly followed throughout the research.

3. Results

The study explores whether the educational opportunities provided in prisons really help young ex-offenders make a successful transition back into society. The themes and

sub-themes identified in this study are presented below and supported with quotations to support the participants' claims.

3.1. Personal Development

The predominant theme that emerged from this study was personal development. The result revealed that young people with a history of offending had experienced positive outcomes from the educational programmes provided within correctional services. Moreover, it was found that participation in correctional education had contributed to the enhanced personal development of these individuals. Within this overarching theme, several sub-themes were identified, including promotion of mental health and well-being, self-efficacy, harmonious coexistence with community members and families and involvement in community services. The second theme that emerged from this study was economic development. Two sub-themes were identified as follows: vocational training and Entrepreneurial development skills. Of the 20 participants, 15 primarily emphasised personal development as a major outcome of their participation in correctional education programmes. In contrast, economic development was highlighted by 5 participants.

3.1.1. Promotion of Mental Health and Well-Being

In this sub-theme, the majority of participants (n = 12) indicated that, during their time in correctional facilities, they were provided with opportunities to participate in educational programmes designed to promote health and well-being through counselling. Participants further elaborated that these interventions facilitated their reintegration into society by equipping them with essential social skills, such as anger management. One of the participants during the interview said this

> "Before I came to prison, I was someone who easily got angry and took out my stress and frustration to other people by beating them. But, after attending counselling sessions in correctional service I started to learn the importance of controlling my anger and managing my stress. These sessions helped me a lot honestly speaking because I can tell you now when I am stressed and depressed, I don't act violently toward others because I have better strategies for managing stress than before".

Other participants, as illustrated in the verbatim excerpts below, narrated that they were able to reintegrate into mainstream society because the education they received taught them the importance of self-forgiveness as a prerequisite for societal forgiveness and acceptance.

> "Being in correctional services led me to develop anxiety about what life would be like for me upon my release but, attending a number of counselling sessions that address mental health, and psychological well-being helped me to deal with my anxiety because I was taught the importance of forgiving myself. I think this helped me to integrate within the society even though it was very challenging from the start".

> "As much as we need basic literacy and vocational training while in prison, we also need educational programmes that address our psychological and emotional well-being. Through the educational programmes that look at our mental health, I think the programmes prepared me to face the world upon my release".

The statements above unveil the importance of comprehensive correctional education that goes beyond basic literacy and vocational training. By incorporating mental health support and counselling services, these programmes contribute to the overall well-being of ex-offenders, thereby enhancing their ability to adapt and thrive upon re-entry into society.

3.1.2. Self-Efficacy

In this sub-theme, participants reported that the holistic education programmes received in correctional facilities helped them develop confidence and a sense of self-worth as they prepared to return to the communities, they had previously wronged. This growth was attributed to educational programmes that emphasized the importance of building self-confidence.

> "I have attended a number of sessions on life skills where a number of issues ranging from self-love, perseverance, human rights, peace and love were covered. This session helped me develop a new perspective on life and believe that upon my release I will make a positive impact in my community. I have been doing that through community service projects so I can tell those programmes in correctional services helped me".

> "While in correctional services I attended sessions that helped me to discover myself and assisted me to set up short- and long-term goals and not worry about the past but focus on the future. I strongly believe that this intervention prepared me to face the community that I thought would never forgive after committing crimes in my community".

> "I attended life skills programmes where as a group of young men, we were taught the importance of respecting ourselves and also women. I was in prison because I insulted my girlfriend because I thought being a man must be aggressive towards women. But life skills programmes in correctional services helped me to be a better man, start respecting women, develop a high self-esteem and tell myself that I can be a good man who can make an impact in my community. Such education helped me to be a better man, now I have a girlfriend whom I respect and thanks to the education that I received while incarcerated".

The above excerpts emphasise the varying degrees of the significance of educational opportunities provided in correctional services in improving young ex-offender's self-efficacy. This is implemented in life skills programmes that young ex-offenders receive which taught them essential life skills that were important in their reintegration into society.

3.1.3. Harmonious Coexistence with Community Members

Young people often engage in criminal behavior as a result of difficulties in regulating their emotions and feelings. Consequently, providing targeted emotional support is critical for their rehabilitation. Several participants indicated that, during their time in correctional facilities, they took part in educational programmes specifically designed to enhance emotional development. They reflected that these programmes not only improved their emotional regulation but also played a pivotal role in facilitating their successful reintegration into society.

> "During my time in prison, I received several educational interventions that were centred around moral education. These programmes played a crucial role in preparing me to live in harmony with myself, my family and my community. Without these interventions, I doubt that I would have been able to reintegrate into society as peacefully as I have. The programmes emphasised the importance of making sound decisions in life, which is essential for maintaining positive relationships with others. Now, almost a year after my release, I feel confident in my ability to make the right choices. I no longer consume alcohol or drugs as I recognise that substance abuse was a key factor that led to my imprisonment in the first place".

> "While in prison, there was an ex-offender who was often invited by one of our teachers to speak to us about personal choices and moral education. This ex-offender emphasised the importance of self-reflection, which helped me take responsibility for the wrongs I had committed against society and my family. As a result, upon my release, I was able to apologise to my family and community for my actions. This, in turn, facilitated my reintegration into society, as my family and community were able to forgive me".

The quotations provided above reflect the transformative power of correctional education interventions, particularly those focused on moral education in the rehabilitation of offenders.

3.1.4. Involvement in Community Services

Under this sub-theme, a few participants (n = 4) reported that the educational programme they attended while in correctional facilities included a component called Serving the Community. The primary purpose of this sub-programme was to equip participants with the knowledge and skills necessary to engage in community service projects. Participants further explained that taking part in this programme facilitated their reintegration into society, as it enabled them to actively participate in community initiatives and gain acceptance from community members.

> "While in correctional services, I attended several educational programmes that taught us the importance of serving our community upon release. These programmes helped me take community service seriously, which, in turn, made it easier for community members to accept me".

> "While in correctional services, I learned about getting involved in community service without accepting any form of payment. We were taught that this would help us be accepted by the community upon our release. Currently, I do community service by maintaining the garden at the local health community centre. I believe this has helped everyone accept me as a changed man".

The participant's reflections above illustrate the profound impact of correctional educational programmes on shaping attitudes toward community service.

3.2. Economic Development

Another prominent theme that emerged in the study is economic development. Young ex-offenders reported that the interventions they received during their time in correctional services significantly enhanced their economic opportunities. This enhancement played a crucial role in their successful reintegration into society as it enabled them to earn an honest living, drawing upon the education they received while incarcerated. Within this overarching theme, several sub-themes were identified, notably vocational training and entrepreneurial development skills, which contributed to their economic empowerment and societal reintegration.

3.2.1. Vocational Training

Certain participants reported that education focused specifically on technical skills in correctional facilities helped them acquire important skills that restore their dignity within society, as they were able to support their families financially. Skills obtained through programmes such as plumbing and house building enabled them to participate in the mainstream economy by offering their labour to others. In addition, participants narrated that these programmes transformed their lives and facilitated their peaceful reintegration into society.

> "I received training in plumbing while in correctional services. This training, as one of the components of correctional education, restored my dignity as a man within society. Now, I can go to different households, perform plumbing work and earn an income, which allows me to support myself and my family financially. I don't think I would have successfully reintegrated into society if it weren't for this training".

> "Before I entered correctional services, I didn't know how to build houses but now I can. When others in my community get jobs to build houses, they hire me. This has helped me successfully reintegrate into society. As you know, without skills these days, especially as a man, no one accepts you".

It is evident from the response above that the plumbing training received during correctional services played a crucial role in facilitating successful reintegration into society.

3.2.2. Entrepreneurial Development Skills

Under this sub-theme, participants (n = 5) reported that, during their time in correctional facilities, they engaged in entrepreneurial education programmes designed to complement the vocational and technical training they received. These programmes provided training in business management and equipped participants with the skills necessary to start and sustain their own businesses. Participants reflected that acquiring these entrepreneurial skills not only empowered them economically but also played a critical role in supporting their successful reintegration into society by fostering independence and self-reliance.

> "I learned how to start my own business while in correctional services and applied these skills to establish my own enterprise upon my release. I now run a Shisanyama (braai) business, which has received significant support from the community. Additionally, I hire other young people, which has facilitated my successful reintegration into society".

> "I received welding and entrepreneurial training while in correctional services. With these skills, I now run a welding business and employ other young people. My efforts have not only helped me turn my life around but have also earned acceptance from those I previously wronged. By empowering youth and providing them with employment opportunities, I aim to prevent them from making the same mistakes I once did".

> "I received training in entrepreneurship, which helped me gain essential entrepreneurial skills. I attempted to start my own business but securing funding has been challenging and I sometimes struggle with online funding applications. I believe there is a need for computer literacy training within the correctional services as it would allow individuals to learn more about technology. This would make it easier for offenders to understand and utilise technology upon their release".

The statement made above by one of the participants illustrates that, through the entrepreneurial skills gained in correctional facilities via educational programmes, he intends to start his own business once he receives financial support. The participant further highlighted the need for correctional education programmes to place greater emphasis on computer literacy to ensure that young people become digitally competent.

4. Discussion

The study explores whether the educational opportunities provided in prisons really help young ex-offenders make a successful transition back into society. Some young people

in developing countries, such as South Africa, find themselves in conflict with the law for various reasons, including mental health issues and a lack of purpose in life. These factors often lead to unhappiness and subsequently to criminal activities (Khan & Singh, 2014). According to Phillips (2019), there are a variety of factors that drive young people to criminal activities such as poverty and psychological issues. The findings of this study indicate a positive relationship between correctional education and the promotion of mental health and well-being among young ex-offenders.

The study revealed that participating in educational programmes while in correctional services significantly improved the mental health and well-being of young ex-offenders. Additionally, it was found that these young ex-offenders had attended several educational programmes focused on counselling during their time in correctional service. Through these programmes, young ex-offenders were taught the importance of managing stress and not allowing it, or any form of depression, to lead them into committing crimes. Shabangu (2021) stated that young offenders, while in correctional services, receive counselling and guidance that prepare them for societal reintegration. Instead, they were encouraged to develop effective strategies for dealing with mental health issues such as depression and stress. These findings highlight the crucial role of correctional education in supporting the mental health and well-being of young ex-offenders, ultimately contributing to their successful reintegration into society and reducing the likelihood of reoffending. Roessger et al. (2021) emphasise the beneficial effects of correctional education on the social and psychological well-being of ex-offenders, both young and old, which plays a crucial role in their rehabilitation and successful reintegration into society.

The study further revealed that correctional education programmes play a vital role in preparing young ex-offenders for reintegration into society. These programmes provide essential mental health and psychological well-being services, which are instrumental in helping individuals cope with anxiety and overcome the challenges associated with societal perceptions post-release. Fazel and Baillargeon (2011) emphasise the urgent need to prioritise mental health initiatives within correctional services due to the high prevalence of substance abuse among inmates. According to Wallace and Wang (2020), correctional education is essential in developing offenders' cognitive skills, contributing significantly to their rehabilitation. Participants consistently highlighted the significance of these educational initiatives in addressing their mental health needs. Erickson (2018) argues that correctional education programmes focusing on psychological well-being are crucial, as they enhance offenders' sense of self-worth and confidence. These developments are key in enabling them to obtain meaningful employment post-release, thereby supporting their successful reintegration into society.

Many young ex-offenders reported that the counselling and stress management components of the programmes were particularly beneficial. These aspects of the correctional education programmes equipped them with strategies to manage stress, depression and anxiety, which are common issues faced by ex-offenders. The study further shows the importance of comprehensive correctional education that goes beyond basic literacy and vocational training. By incorporating mental health support and counselling services, these programmes contribute to the overall well-being of ex-offenders, thereby enhancing their ability to adapt and thrive upon re-entry into society. Erickson (2018) argues that correctional education programmes focusing on psychological well-being are crucial, as they enhance offenders' sense of self-worth and confidence. These developments are key in enabling them to obtain meaningful employment post-release, thereby supporting their successful reintegration into society.

The successful reintegration of young ex-offenders into society hinges on their belief in their ability to coexist peacefully with community members and avoid recidivism. The

narratives gathered from the participants during the interviews reveal the significant role that educational programmes, received while in correctional service, played in shaping their self-efficacy. Participation in correctional education significantly boosts self-confidence, self-efficacy and self-esteem among young offenders, which helps them to successfully reintegrate into society (Rogers et al., 2014). This, in turn, facilitated their reintegration into their communities. Participants consistently highlighted how these educational initiatives contributed to their personal development and transformation. These findings support the work of Rogers et al. (2014), which shows that correctional education plays a vital role in improving young offenders' self-esteem and self-confidence. They emphasised that acquiring new skills and knowledge not only provided them with practical tools for employment and self-sufficiency but also fostered a sense of accomplishment and self-worth. This newfound self-confidence was crucial in helping them envision a future free from criminal activities. In addition, the study revealed varying degrees of the significance of educational opportunities provided in correctional services in improving young ex-offender's self-efficacy.

The findings suggest that the variety of life skills programmes that young ex-offenders received in correctional service helped them to set up goals, develop self-confidence and have respect towards other people, particularly women. Johnson (2015) emphasises that participants in correctional education programmes receive instruction in anger management and life orientation, which are essential for successful reintegration into society. Therefore, it is crucial for young delinquents to develop emotional control skills to prevent future delinquent behaviour. In contemporary settings, correctional education has shifted its focus towards equipping offenders with essential life skills, such as interpersonal collaboration, which are crucial for successful reintegration into society (Ravele, 2022) However, in modern situations, the emphasis of correctional education has turned toward preparing offenders with vital life skills, such as interpersonal cohesiveness and economic aptitude, which are required for effective reintegration into society (Ravele, 2022). This assisted them to integrate into mainstream society. This finding shares the same sentiment with O'Grady (2017) who argues that correctional education provides young offenders with valuable life skills lessons that help them to set goals for themselves and to respect themselves and the people around them. While in correctional service, offenders regardless of their age near upon their release worry if they will be accepted and be able to live with community members in a dignified manner. This finding supports Chauke and Malatji (2021) that young ex-offenders encounter significant obstacles in their attempts to reintegrate into mainstream society, as they grapple with the challenging transition from incarceration to community life. The analysis of the participants' narratives revealed a significant aspect of the rehabilitation process for young ex-offenders during their incarceration.

A central finding was that the provision of educational programmes aimed specifically at addressing issues of moral degeneration. These programmes were designed not merely as a punitive measure but as a rehabilitative strategy intended to prepare young offenders for reintegration into society. The emphasis on moral education reflects an understanding of the importance of equipping these individuals with the ethical and social skills necessary to live in a dignified manner among community members upon their release. The study by Hanushek et al. (2013) reveals that correctional education is pivotal in promoting healthy behaviours and social skills among young offenders, which significantly aids in their reintegration into society.

The study further highlights the significance of correctional education programmes in fostering self-awareness, sound decision-making and the ability to reintegrate into society. In support of my study, it has been observed that young ex-offenders who utilise educational opportunities within correctional environments demonstrate increased self-

awareness, which significantly contributes to their reintegration into society (Behan, 2014). The young ex-offenders acknowledge that without such interventions, successful reintegration would have been unlikely, particularly in overcoming substance abuse, which had previously led to imprisonment. Contrary to the study findings, Kajawo and Johnson (2023) argue that after release, young ex-offenders face distinct challenges in reintegrating into society due to the education they received within correctional facilities, which may not align with the realities of the outside world. In addition, the narrative from the young ex-offenders further reinforces the importance of self-reflection, as catalysed by an ex-offender's guidance, in helping the individual take responsibility for past actions. This process of self-reflection and accountability not only facilitated personal growth but also enabled the individual to seek forgiveness from their family and community, which was crucial for their reintegration.

Ex-offenders experience enhanced self-determination and accountability through correctional education. Upon re-entering society, they are then responsible for acknowledging their transgressions and seeking forgiveness from their victims and the wider community (Tonseth et al., 2019). Collectively, these narratives underscore the critical role that moral education and the support of mentors can play in the rehabilitation process, ultimately leading to more successful societal reintegration. Correctional education, by prioritising personal development, equips ex-offenders with the necessary tools to lead meaningful lives within their families and communities (Szifris, 2018).

The study's findings indicate that the "Serving the Community" educational programme had a significant impact on young ex-offenders, fostering a transformation in their attitudes toward community service. The programme was designed not only to emphasise the importance of contributing positively to society but also to cultivate a new mindset among participants, encouraging them to view community service as a means of personal and social rehabilitation. Esperian's (2010) study shows that correctional education teaches offenders the importance of civic responsibility that helps them to successfully reintegrate into society. As a result of the programme, several ex-offenders successfully reintegrated into their communities by offering their services voluntarily. This proactive engagement in community activities facilitated their acceptance by community members, who began to perceive them as individuals committed to personal change and societal improvement. The positive reception from the community underscores the programme's effectiveness in reshaping public perceptions of ex-offenders and highlights the potential of educational interventions to support successful societal reintegration. Moreover, Honorato (2022) notes that correctional education enhances juvenile offenders' ethical understanding, creativity, openness and engagement in society. Consequently, these individuals are more likely to reintegrate successfully by actively participating in social activities. The study found that correctional education programmes further encourage young offenders to participate in community service programmes. Hanushek et al. (2013) emphasise that correctional education is pivotal in fostering civic engagement and promoting among young offenders, which significantly aids in their reintegration into society.

The study findings revealed that during their time in correctional services, young ex-offenders received training across various fields, equipping them with vocational skills that significantly enhanced their employability. The vocational programmes provided within the correctional facilities enabled participants to acquire practical skills in welding, plumbing, construction and tile making. In Zambia, incarcerated individuals undergo vocational literacy training through correctional education, equipping them to lead productive lives upon their release (Kakupaa & Mulenga, 2021). These skills not only contributed to their personal development but also prepared them for reintegration into the workforce, thereby increasing their potential for securing employment upon release. The training offered

a pathway to rehabilitation by fostering a sense of purpose and competence among the participants. A previous study shows that correctional education has shifted its focus towards equipping offenders with essential skills such as financial literacy, which are crucial for successful reintegration into society (Ravele, 2022). Prior to incarceration, the individual lacked the skills necessary for trade such as construction; however, post-training, they have been able to leverage their newfound skills to secure employment opportunities. This highlights the critical importance of vocational training in enhancing employability and acceptance within the community, underscoring that, in today's job market, skills acquisition is vital for societal reintegration and personal acceptance.

The findings of the study revealed the significant role of entrepreneurial development within the correctional education programme for young ex-offenders. The programme's focus on entrepreneurship highlighted its importance as a pathway to self-employment upon release. By integrating entrepreneurial skills with vocational training, the programme provided young ex-offenders with the necessary tools to launch and sustain their own businesses. Vocational training within correctional education fosters independence and self-sufficiency among ex-offenders. Quan-Baffour and Zawada (2012) underscore the vital role of correctional education in equipping prisoners with the skills necessary for entrepreneurial endeavours upon release, thereby preparing them to establish their own businesses. This dual approach not only enhanced their capacity for self-employment but also played a critical role in their successful reintegration into society. The ability to establish and manage their own enterprises facilitated financial independence, thereby reducing their dependence on external support and contributing to a more stable and productive reintegration process. Nichols (2016) emphasises that correctional education should prioritise employment-oriented programmes, which facilitate ex-offenders' access to dignified vocations upon their release. Incarcerated individuals who engage in educational programmes often utilise the knowledge acquired to seek additional educational opportunities, thereby enhancing their employability (Delaney & Smith, 2018). However, challenges such as securing funding and navigating online applications highlight a critical need for enhanced computer literacy training within correctional services to better equip offenders for post-release success. The findings of this study contribute to the existing body of knowledge in correctional education by demonstrating its positive impact on the development of young ex-offenders, which plays a crucial role in their successful reintegration into society.

This study has certain methodological limitations. Firstly, the sample was limited to 20 participants from the Cape Flats in the Western Cape, South Africa. As a result, the findings cannot be generalized to all young ex-offenders who participated in correctional education across other provinces in South Africa. Secondly, the use of phone interviews and Microsoft Teams for data collection, while necessary for logistical reasons, may have limited the depth of interaction and the ability to capture non-verbal cues, which could have enriched the data. Moreover, relying on self-reported information may introduce bias, as participants might have presented themselves in a socially desirable manner. These limitations highlight the need for future research involving larger, more diverse samples across multiple provinces, and the use of a mixed-methods approach to critically evaluate both the positive and negative aspects of correctional education in facilitating reintegration.

5. Conclusions

This study seeks to report on whether the educational opportunities provided in correctional services really help young ex-offenders to successfully transition back into society. It became clear in this study that educational opportunities that young ex-offenders receive while in correctional service play an important role in shaping their personal and skills

economic development skills, which helps them to successfully reintegrate into society. Furthermore, this study advocates for the deployment of a revolutionary pedagogical approach to correctional education aiming at comprehensive education of young offenders. This pedagogy should use modern digital technologies, allowing correctional educators to undertake pre-attendance assessments of each offender's learning preferences, inclinations as well as individual aptitudes and limitations. This method facilitates the learning of basic education required for successful reintegration of young offenders into society. It is important to stress that after release, young offenders face significant hurdles in integrating with the mainstream economy, limiting their societal reintegration. In light of this, correctional facilities are encouraged to develop a stakeholder framework to foster a symbiotic relationship between said facilities and youth-centric organisations, such as non-governmental organisations (NGOs), allowing young ex-offenders to engage in year-long youth services while also securing financial sustenance. These reformed people could be intentionally put in high-crime areas to highlight the far-reaching effects of criminal behaviour. Furthermore, in accordance with the proposed stakeholder framework, correctional facilities are encouraged to form a long-term five-year partnership with the National Youth Development Agency (NYDA) to facilitate periodic visits to correctional institutions, providing young offenders with critical business management skills. The NYDA can allocate financial assistance, accounting for 20% of hopeful young ex-offenders' ventures into the entrepreneurial sector upon their release.

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