AN EXPLORATION OF EDUCATIONAL EXPERIENCES OF INCARCERATED YOUTH REGISTERED FOR THE NATIONAL SENIOR CERTIFICATE EXAMINATIONS IN A CORRECTIONAL CENTRE IN THE PROVINCE OF KWAZULU-NATAL

By

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DECLARATION

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6. I made use of generative AI in this dissertation in the following areas:

    a) To search for literature and find proponents and policies that guide the prison education system in South Africa and internationally.
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Signature

DEDICATION

This study is dedicated to my family, who served as my pillar of strength throughout this academic journey and whose unwavering belief in me sustained my perseverance.

I also dedicate this work to myself, in recognition of the resilience, courage, and self-belief required to persevere through the challenges encountered in pursuing this degree.

Finally, this study is dedicated to the participants whose willingness to share their life stories made it possible to document and honour their narratives.

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ABSTRACT

The proposed study examines prison education by investigating the experiences of incarcerated youth who participated in the National Senior Certificate (NSC) examination programme in the KwaZulu-Natal province. It contributes to discussions on education as a form of rehabilitation and how the youth in correctional spaces navigate their experiences in preparation for the final NSC examination. The study focuses on factors that influence the educational experiences of incarcerated youths during NSC preparation, including limitations and enabling support.

Situated in the critical paradigm, the study employed a qualitative design and a narrative inquiry methodological approach. Purposive sampling was used to recruit eight incarcerated youth registered for the NSC at the correctional centre in KwaZulu-Natal. Data were generated through in-depth semi-structured interviews and analysed using a thematic analysis approach. The study drew on Paulo Freire's (Pedagogy of the Oppressed) and critical theory as the conceptual framework that underpins the entire study. The findings indicated that the participation of incarcerated youth in the NSC examination programme was life-changing, as studying enabled participants to reconsider past decisions, imagine alternative futures, and think beyond correctional walls.

Participants linked the normalisation of alcohol and drug use to their pathways into crime, which they claimed affected their judgment and reduced their capacity to foresee long-term repercussions. Preparation for the NSC has been shown to improve communication skills and conflict resolution, foster moral reflection, and restore dignity damaged by the stigma of imprisonment. However, limited subject offerings and gang-related violence also affected education. They went on to emphasise toxic masculinity, which was one of the causes of the escalation of violence and retaliation to prove one's manhood as a cause for their pathway to incarceration. The study argues that NSC examination in correctional centres can support personal transformation, but that its benefits depend on safe learning environments and sustained support in the relationship. In addition, participants perceived teachers as mentors and parental figures who provided

both teaching and material support, while peer-learning groups and knowledge sharing reinforced motivation and resilience. The findings suggest that improving correctional education requires proper attention not only to curriculum but also to safety, dignity, and proper reintegration into society.

Keywords: Correctional education, incarcerated youth, educational experiences, NSC examination, reintegration, rehabilitation

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ABBREVIATIONS

ACEs	Adverse Childhood Experiences
ADHD	Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder
AET	Adult Education and Training
CAT	Computer Applications Technology
DBE	Department of Basic Education
DCS	Department of Correctional Services
GED	General Educational Development
ICCPR	International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights
ICESCR	International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights
ICT	Information and Communication Technology
LLB	Legum Baccalaureus/Bachelor of Laws
NCS	National Curriculum Statement
NSC	National Senior Certificate
PTSD	Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder
UDHR	Universal Declaration of Human Rights
UN	United Nations
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization
UNISA	University of South Africa

1. CHAPTER 1: ORIENTATION OF THE STUDY

> "*When people become prisoners of daily habits and happen to be hostages of choices, which they made in the past, but which they finally do not actually want, they experience the need to abandon their corporeal prison at a certain time in life. ("Corporeal prison")*"
> Erik Pevernagie (Pevernagie, n.d.) (speech quote)

1.1 Introduction to the Study

Erik Pevernagie's reflection on the "corporeal prison" gestures toward both external incarceration and internal confinement shaped by habit, circumstance, and past choices. While incarceration is commonly understood as physical detention within correctional facilities, many incarcerated individuals are simultaneously burdened by the enduring consequences of decisions made under conditions of poverty, marginalisation, and limited access to education (Western & Muller, 2013). Over time, these decisions may no longer reflect individuals' desired identities or life aspirations. In this sense, the "corporeal prison" extends beyond the physical body to encompass emotional, psychological, and existential forms of captivity marked by regret, constrained self-conceptions, and missed opportunities.

Within this context, education in correctional settings emerges as a critical pathway for transformation. Educational engagement offers incarcerated individuals an opportunity to disrupt limiting identities, challenge internalised narratives of failure, and imagine alternative futures, both within and beyond institutional confinement (Lerman & Sadin, 2022). Through initiatives such as the National Senior Certificate (NSC) examinations and university distance learning programmes, education enables individuals to reclaim a sense of agency and autonomy in shaping their identities. López-Armijos and Romero (2025) similarly observe that educational programmes within correctional environments are designed to foster social participation and rehabilitation, supporting offenders in overcoming both the material and perceived constraints of imprisonment.

These perspectives resonate strongly with Pevernagie's assertion that individuals often

become “prisoners of daily habits” and “hostages of choices” they no longer wish to inhabit, prompting a desire to escape their “corporeal prison” at particular moments in their lives (Pevernagie, n.d.). Taken together, these views foreground education as a transformative mechanism, one that facilitates not only the pursuit of physical freedom but also the dismantling of deeply embedded mental, emotional, and social restraints. This study is situated within this conceptual terrain, examining education as a site of possibility, resistance, and reimagining for incarcerated learners.

This introductory chapter outlines the study's focus, purpose, and rationale. It begins by presenting the study's background, with particular attention to the experience of studying while incarcerated and the complexities of learning in correctional environments. The chapter then sets out the research questions and objectives guiding the inquiry, followed by a brief discussion of the conceptual framework underpinning the study. An overview of the methodological approach is subsequently provided. The study adopts a narrative inquiry approach, and to foreground participants’ voices, brief narrative accounts are included to illuminate who the participants are and how they make meaning of their educational experiences. The chapter concludes with an outline of the overall structure of the dissertation.

It should be noted that the terminology used by the Department of Correctional Services (DCS) has evolved. Terms such as ‘prison’ have been replaced by ‘correctional centre’, and ‘prisoner’ by ‘offender’. However, in this study, these terms are used interchangeably, as they remain prevalent in both the empirical and theoretical literature examined.

1.2 Background and Context of the Study

Section 29(1) of the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa (1996) enshrines the right to basic education as a fundamental right for all citizens, including those incarcerated. In giving effect to this constitutional mandate, the South African government has developed a range of legislative and policy frameworks to promote access to education in correctional settings. Notably, the Correctional Services Act 111 of 1998 and the White Paper on Corrections in South Africa (2005) explicitly position

education as a central pillar of rehabilitation and reintegration (Republic of South Africa, 1998; Department of Correctional Services, 2005).

These policy frameworks seek to ensure that offenders, including young people, are afforded meaningful educational opportunities during incarceration. However, despite the progressive nature of South Africa's post-apartheid legal and policy environment, the correctional education system continues to be shaped by enduring historical and structural inequalities. During apartheid, prisons were racially segregated, and educational provision for Black offenders, including African, Coloured, and Indian individuals, was either severely limited or absent (Seekings, 2008). As Symkovych (2025) argues, racialised disparities originating in the apartheid era persist in contemporary correctional education, manifesting in systemic neglect, uneven resource allocation, and constrained rehabilitative initiatives.

The effects of these historical injustices remain evident among the current generation of incarcerated youth. This cohort continues to experience the cumulative consequences of marginalisation exacerbated by an apartheid system that prioritised punishment over rehabilitation, particularly in relation to Black inmates (Johnson, 2015). In the post-apartheid period, South Africa has faced significant socio-economic challenges, including high levels of crime and violence. Empirical evidence indicates that persistent unemployment, poverty, and inequality remain associated with criminal behaviour and incarceration, notwithstanding the country's democratic transition (Bhorat et al., 2017; Lamb & Warton, 2025). For many incarcerated individuals, including youth, these structural conditions extend beyond imprisonment, as limited access to stable employment, weakened social networks, and restricted social capital continue to undermine prospects for successful reintegration upon release (Sentencing Project, 2023).

Youth incarceration in South Africa thus reflects broader patterns of social exclusion and systemic inequality. Young offenders often originate from communities characterised by entrenched poverty, under-resourced schools, family instability, and sustained exposure to violence. These conditions frequently disrupt educational trajectories and contribute

to pathways into conflict with the law (Jarjoura et al., 2002; Harper & McLanahan, 2004; Byrne, 2014; Van Brunschot & Humphrey, 2022). In recognition of these realities, the DCS has increasingly emphasised rehabilitative education as a strategic intervention. According to DCS (2023), approximately 11,850 offenders were enrolled in formal education programmes across South African correctional centres, with 2,380 registered for Adult Education and Training (AET) Level 4 and 1,160 for the NSC.

A substantial proportion of these learners are youth aged between 18 and 25 years, predominantly male, reflecting broader national incarceration trends. The correctional centre under study, located in KwaZulu-Natal, offers an NSC programme aligned with the formal school curriculum for Grades 9 to 12. This programme constitutes a key rehabilitative strategy aimed at addressing the educational deficits experienced by incarcerated youth. Participation in correctional education, however, is not universal. While some young offenders participate in educational programmes due to institutional encouragement or compulsory requirements, others view education as a constructive way to fill time during incarceration (Johnson, 2015). Conversely, some offenders disengage from educational opportunities due to factors such as low motivation, psychological distress, or inadequate institutional support.

Despite notable advances in expanding educational access in correctional facilities, persistent challenges remain. Research consistently highlights shortages of qualified teaching staff, limited learning resources, inadequate infrastructure, and the marginal prioritisation of education within correctional environments (Miselo & Mutereko, 2019; Mafilika & Marongwe, 2024). Moreover, educational provision in prisons is often embedded within highly disciplinary and coercive institutional cultures, which can constrain learner autonomy and inhibit active participation (Vaught, 2017). These conditions present significant barriers to meaningful learning and long-term personal development.

Nevertheless, a growing body of scholarship underscores the transformative potential of education in correctional contexts. Studies by Behan (2014) and Addae (2020) suggest that educational engagement can foster critical reflection, personal growth, and the

reimagining of life trajectories among incarcerated learners. In the absence of sustained educational support, however, young people remain particularly vulnerable to recidivism, especially when confronted with post-release challenges such as unemployment, poverty, and limited familial or community support (Wheelock & Uggen, 2008; Cobb-Clark & Zhu, 2017).

Against this backdrop, the present study investigates the educational experiences of incarcerated youth enrolled in the NSC programme at a correctional facility in KwaZulu-Natal. It examines learners' access to education, their participation in educational programmes, and their perceptions of the value and impact of correctional education. By foregrounding the voices and experiences of these learners, the study seeks to contribute to the development of more responsive, equitable, and effective educational interventions within South Africa's correctional system.

1.3 Problem Statement

Education is widely recognised as a critical mechanism for the rehabilitation and reintegration of incarcerated individuals. In South Africa, this recognition is reflected in policy commitments that seek to align correctional education with the national curriculum. Despite these commitments, a persistent disjuncture remains between legislative intentions and the lived educational realities of incarcerated youth (Jonck et al., 2015). Although formal educational programmes are offered within correctional facilities, they are frequently delivered in contexts marked by inadequate infrastructure, outdated learning materials, and insufficiently trained educators. These conditions significantly undermine the transformative potential of education within correctional environments (Flynn & Higdon, 2022).

International scholarship further suggests that prison education must extend beyond a narrow focus on basic literacy and vocational training to encompass transformative, critical, and civic dimensions of learning. Drawing on a study conducted in England and Wales, Flynn and Higdon (2022) argue that such an approach is necessary to address the structural barriers that perpetuate prisoners' marginalisation from mainstream educational systems. Transformative education, in this sense, supports the development

of critical thinking, self- agency, and the competencies required for meaningful social reintegration. However, correctional systems often inherit deeply entrenched educational inequalities without possessing the pedagogical flexibility or responsiveness needed to address them effectively. In practice, efforts to integrate formal curricula into prison education frequently fall short, as incarcerated learners continue to experience limited access to quality teaching, particularly in literacy programmes. These challenges are compounded by rigid institutional cultures, overcrowded learning spaces, and the absence of differentiated teaching strategies (Ondras & Alvero, 2022).

Both global and regional studies have also highlighted the limitations of singular, achievement-oriented models of prison education that prioritise academic outcomes while neglecting critical dimensions such as psychosocial support, cultural responsiveness, and emancipatory pedagogical frameworks (Behan, 2014). Incarcerated youth, in particular, require educational approaches that not only develop academic competencies but also foster personal growth, critical consciousness, and self-efficacy. Despite this need, educational provision within many South African correctional facilities remains fragmented and insufficiently oriented towards rehabilitation, thereby limiting its capacity to support successful reintegration and to reduce recidivism (Ngabonziza & Singh, 2012; Mohau, 2021).

The challenges of correctional education are further intensified by the difficulties associated with post-incarceration reintegration. Even where incarcerated individuals acquire literacy and academic qualifications, the effective translation of these gains into improved life outcomes is frequently constrained by persistent societal stigma, restricted access to employment opportunities, and the absence of coordinated re-entry support systems (Chikadzi, 2017; Mourão et al., 2025). Although international research demonstrates a strong association between participation in prison education, reduced recidivism, and improved post-release outcomes (Ellison et al., 2017; Magee, 2021), South Africa's rehabilitation efforts continue to be hampered by systemic inefficiencies, fragmented implementation, and limited follow-up mechanisms (Murhula & Singh, 2019; Herbig & Hesselink, 2012).

Against this backdrop, there is a clear need for an in-depth investigation into the educational experiences of incarcerated youth in South Africa. In particular, there is limited empirical insight into how the national curriculum is implemented in correctional education programmes, whether it adequately addresses the diverse educational and psychosocial needs of incarcerated learners, and which factors enable or constrain meaningful engagement with learning in correctional contexts. This study seeks to address these gaps by examining the educational experiences of incarcerated youth registered for the NSC examinations in a KwaZulu-Natal correctional centre. By identifying the structural, pedagogical, and rehabilitative challenges that shape these experiences, the study aims to contribute evidence- based insights that may inform more equitable, responsive, and transformative correctional education policies and practices.

1.4 Research Purpose and Aims, Objectives and Questions

The purpose of this study is to explore the educational experiences of incarcerated youth registered for the NSC examination in the province of KwaZulu-Natal. The study focuses on the experiences of incarcerated youth with the current NSC programmes in preparation for the NSC examination, through the conceptual lenses of Paulo Freire and critical theory. The study also aims to investigate the factors that influence the educational experiences of incarcerated youth in preparation for NSC examinations. It further aims to explore how participants navigate the factors that influence their educational experiences as incarcerated youth.

1.4.1 Research Objectives

The main objective of the study was:

- To investigate the educational experiences of incarcerated youth registered for the NSC examination in the province of KwaZulu-Natal.

The subsidiary objectives of the study were to:

- Identify factors that influence the educational experiences of incarcerated youth in preparation for the NSC examinations.
- Explore how incarcerated learners navigate the factors that influence educational

experiences.

1.4.2 Key Research Questions

The study aimed to respond to specific research questions. The main research question for the study was:

- What are the educational experiences of incarcerated youth registered for the NSC examination in the province of KwaZulu-Natal?

The subsidiary research questions for the study were:

- What are the factors that influence the educational experiences of incarcerated youth in preparation for NSC examinations?
- How do incarcerated learners navigate the factors that influence their educational experiences?

1.5 Definition of Terms

This section defines key terms as they are used in this study to ensure conceptual clarity and consistency throughout the dissertation.

1.5.1 Incarcerated Youth

Although the concept of youth is defined in various ways in the South African context, this study adopts the definition provided in the National Youth Development Agency Act 54 of 2008, which classifies youth as individuals aged 15 to 35 years (Republic of South Africa, 2008). In this study, incarcerated youth refers specifically to individuals within this age range who are serving sentences in South African correctional centres.

This definition is further informed by Leone and Wruble (2015, p. 587), who describe incarcerated youth as "school-aged individuals held in youth or adult prisons who continue to have a legal right to education but frequently face significant barriers to accessing quality instructional services." This conceptualisation is particularly relevant to the present study, as it foregrounds both the legal entitlement to education and the structural constraints that shape incarcerated youths' educational experiences.

1.5.2 Reintegration

Reintegration refers to the process through which formerly incarcerated individuals transition back into community life after they have been released. This is to ensure their social, educational, and economic participation and adjustment after serving their time within correctional centres (Uggen et al., 2019; Visher & Travis, 2011)

1.5.3 Educational Experiences

Educational experiences refer to the formal and informal learning processes, challenges, achievements, motivations, and perceptions of incarcerated youth as they participate in educational programmes, including preparation for the NSC examination, within correctional environments. Drawing on Kolb's (2015) experiential learning theory, educational experiences are understood as active and reflective processes through which learners construct knowledge and develop skills.

In correctional contexts, these experiences are often shaped by disrupted educational trajectories, limited resources, institutional constraints, and the significance of peer and informal learning networks. Studies by Carrigan and Maunsell (2014), Sellers (2024), and Gagnon et al. (2025) highlight how such factors influence learners' engagement, meaning- making, and educational outcomes within prison settings.

1.5.4 National Senior Certificate (NSC)

The NSC is a nationally recognised school-leaving qualification awarded to South African learners who complete Grade 12. The NSC is quality-assured by Umalusi, the Council for Quality Assurance in General and Further Education and Training. In the South African education system, the NSC represents a critical milestone, signifying the completion of formal secondary schooling and providing access to further education, training, and employment opportunities (Department of Basic Education, 2024). In this study, the NSC serves as the primary educational programme through which incarcerated youth pursue formal academic advancement while in custody.

1.5.5 Correctional Education

Correctional education refers to structured teaching and learning programmes offered within correctional centres. This could include basic education, vocational training, and formal academic pathways such as the National Senior Certificate, aimed at improving learners' knowledge, skills and thus their post-release prospects (Davis et al., 2014; Esperian, 2010).

1.5.6 Rehabilitation

In the context of this study, rehabilitation is conceptualised as a process through which offenders are supported to reform and transform through structured interventions, including educational programmes such as preparation for the NSC examination. Rehabilitation involves developing academic competencies, vocational skills, and psychosocial resilience that enable individuals to function as law-abiding, productive members of society upon release (Ogunleye, 2014; Mwanza, 2021; Chauke, 2025).

Rehabilitation is regarded as a central objective of the South African correctional system and a key purpose of incarceration. It aligns with the broader goal of restoring offenders' civil rights and social citizenship upon release (Samuel et al., 2024). Within this framework, the DCS bears responsibility for facilitating access to education and skills development that enhance offenders' employability, economic participation, and prospects for sustainable reintegration (Department of Correctional Services, 2005).

1.6 Conceptual Framework

This research is grounded in Critical Theory and Paulo Freire's Pedagogy of the Oppressed, which together provide a lens for exploring the structural and ideological forces impacting the educational experiences of incarcerated youth preparing for the NSC. Critical theory emphasises the importance of identifying and challenging structural inequities, such as poverty, social exclusion, and institutional injustice, that limit access to meaningful education within correctional centres. Freire's pedagogy views education as a liberatory activity, emphasising dialogical participation and critical reflection to help learners discover their potential as agents of change.

In this study, participants reported that engaging in education while incarcerated was a liberatory practice, enabling them to critically examine their circumstances and social positions. Through reflections and dialogue with teachers and peers, they developed critical consciousness, questioned structural inequalities, and envisioned alternative pathways for their lives. Education thus fostered agency, self-worth, and the tools necessary to challenge oppression and prepare for meaningful reintegration into society. The research utilises these conceptual frameworks to present participants' narratives as active evidence of resistance, critical consciousness, and hope, rather than as passive representations of suffering. This conceptual perspective challenges shortfall-centred narratives about incarcerated students and promotes a more socially fair vision of education as an instrument of emancipation and empowerment.

1.7 Methodological Approach

This research employed a narrative inquiry methodology, in which participants shared their experiences regarding the educational programmes provided at the correctional facility through narrative accounts. According to Riessman (2008), narrative inquiry encompasses a range of methods for interpreting texts that share a standard storied structure. This approach emphasises how individuals interpret their experiences through storytelling, thereby facilitating a comprehensive understanding of their perspectives, challenges, and opportunities, which may yield valuable insights and hope for policy change (Tenny et al., 2017).

Within a qualitative research framework, narrative inquiry was employed to capture the richness of perceptions, making it a compelling choice because it aims to understand participants' educational experiences while incarcerated and focuses on the essence of lived experience. This methodology emphasised their unwavering determination and agency in the face of systemic hurdles. The qualitative data were collected through the in-depth semi- structured interviews and discussions with participants. In this study, narrative inquiry was chosen to represent the numerous themes that emerged from the analysis.

1.8 Meeting the Participants

Eight incarcerated youth consented to participate in this study. In keeping with ethical research practice, all participants selected their own pseudonyms: Hopewell, Sanele, Kwanda, Sandile, Charlie, Siyabonga, Ayanda, and Mduduzi. All participants were male; seven identified as Black and one as Coloured. At the time of data generation, all were enrolled in correctional education programmes and were registered to write the NSC examinations.

The participants ranged in age from 23 to 28 years, which falls within the nationally recognised youth category in South Africa. While their personal histories differ in terms of family background, schooling experiences, and social circumstances, their narratives reveal shared exposure to structural and social challenges, including substance abuse, crime, violence, and gender-based violence. These intersecting experiences form an essential backdrop to their educational journeys. They are explored in greater depth through the theme Journeys to Incarceration (Theme 1), which is presented and analysed in Chapter 4.

The brief biographical narratives that follow are not intended as comprehensive life histories, but rather as contextual portraits that situate participants within the study and foreground their voices as meaning-makers of their educational experiences.

1.8.1 Hopewell

Hopewell is a 25-year-old Black male incarcerated for attempted murder, a charge he described as “a grave crime”. Despite his circumstances, he is actively engaged in his education and rehabilitation and is registered for the NSC examination. He participates in reading initiatives and debate activities as part of the Funda Mzansi programme, where peers regard him as a source of inspiration and informal leadership.

Hopewell speaks frequently of his grandmother, whom he credits as a formative influence in his early life. He recalled promising her that he would complete his schooling, a commitment that continues to motivate him. Calm, articulate, and reflective

during the interview, Hopewell demonstrated emotional self-awareness and humility. He conducted the interview primarily in English, with minimal code-switching, which he associated with his dedication to personal growth. He aspires to pursue an LLB through distance learning, with the long-term goal of becoming a lawyer.

1.8.2 Sanele

Sanele is a 25-year-old isiZulu-speaking male serving a seven-year sentence for murder following a fatal altercation over a financial dispute. Arrested in 2020 and sentenced in 2022, he is eligible for parole in 2026. He expressed deep remorse for his actions and credited psychological support services at the correctional centre for assisting him in processing guilt and redirecting his focus towards personal development.

Before incarceration, Sanele completed matric with weak results. Since his imprisonment, however, he has developed a renewed commitment to learning and now regards education as a second chance. Enrolled in the commerce stream, he aspires to pursue studies in logistics or supply chain management. He emphasised the role of education in fostering resilience and purpose, while also advocating for greater access to vocational skills such as welding, carpentry, and agriculture to support reintegration. Throughout the interview, Sanele presented as thoughtful, sincere, and purpose-driven.

1.8.3 Kwanda

Kwanda is a 27-year-old incarcerated learner who was completing Grade 12 at Intuthuko Youth School (pseudonym). Incarcerated since 2017 for theft and a murder charge, which he maintains he did not commit, he left school during Grade 12 due to negative peer influence and lack of focus. In 2022, he chose to restart his education from Grade 10 to rebuild foundational knowledge, particularly in mathematics.

Kwanda views education as a means of reclaiming dignity and redefining his identity beyond his criminal past. Inspired by peers who had completed matric and progressed to university, he expressed a strong desire to make his family proud. While he appreciates the structure and access to education in prison, he identified gaps in career guidance,

vocational training, and support from non-educational prison staff. His narrative reflects resilience and a deep belief in education as a pathway to rehabilitation and renewed purpose.

1.8.4 Sandile

Sandile is a 25-year-old isiZulu-speaking male, fluent in English, serving a 10-year sentence for business robbery and hijacking. At the time of the interview, he had just under three years remaining. He previously attempted matric in 2017 but was unable to complete it due to irregular attendance while working as a taxi conductor.

Currently, enrolled in the NSC commerce stream, Sandile studies Business Studies, Economics, and Accounting. Although he holds no formal prison duties, he plays a supportive role among peers in the classroom. Coming from a modest background, he credits his family's consistent encouragement as a key source of motivation. Sandile plans to pursue a degree in Tourism Management through distance learning and ultimately establish his own clothing brand. During the interview, he appeared grounded, reflective, and quietly confident, expressing a strong commitment to self-improvement.

1.8.5 Charlie

Charlie is a 26-year-old Coloured male, English-speaking with Afrikaans as a second language, serving a 10-year sentence for robbery with aggravating circumstances. Formerly an academically strong learner with aspirations in civil engineering, he left school in Grade 10 due to negative peer influence and the pursuit of quick financial gain.

Charlie described incarceration as a turning point that instilled discipline, emotional maturity, and self-reflection. Now completing his matric, he views education as central to dignity and personal growth, even though he does not intend to pursue tertiary studies. Instead, he plans to manage his father's tiling business and explore entrepreneurial ventures. He praised the inclusive and voluntary nature of prison education, contrasting it favourably with his previous schooling experiences. Charlie framed education as a catalyst for humanity and transformation, despite challenges such as limited access to

technology and gang dynamics.

1.8.6 Siyabonga

Siyabonga is a 26-year-old isiZulu-speaking male serving an 18-year sentence for robbery, with possible release in 2028. He completed Grade 12 before incarceration and chose to repeat it within the correctional centre. He also completed his first year of a Bachelor of Education through distance learning and now aims to pursue a Law degree.

Supported by his family, particularly his mother, Siyabonga views education as both a personal responsibility and a means of modelling positive behaviour for his younger siblings. At the correctional centre, he actively participates in educational and rehabilitation programmes and mentors fellow inmates. His long-term goal is to advocate for prisoners' rights and establish a community centre for at-risk youth. He presented as reflective, articulate, and strongly motivated to challenge dominant stereotypes about incarcerated individuals.

1.8.7 Ayanda

Ayanda is a 23-year-old isiZulu-speaking male incarcerated for a murder committed at the age of 16 during a violent conflict involving his sister. Raised in a fragmented and polygamous family, he experienced multiple forms of trauma, including witnessing his father's murder and maternal abandonment. His grandmother served as his primary caregiver and moral anchor.

Before incarceration, Ayanda struggled academically and was involved in selling drugs. Prison, however, marked a turning point. He is currently preparing for the NSC and performing well academically. He has completed anger management and restorative justice programmes and credits education with helping him avoid gang involvement and regulate his emotions. Despite limited subject choices and career guidance, Ayanda remains focused, viewing education as his pathway to redemption and reintegration.

1.8.8 Mduduzi

Mduduzi is a 28-year-old isiZulu-speaking incarcerated youth serving a reduced 10-year sentence for rape, following an initial 20-year sentence. Arrested at 16, he began formal education in 2021 after transferring to a correctional centre offering a full-time NSC programme.

Mduduzi described himself as a capable learner with average academic performance and expressed deep regret regarding his past. Although he once aspired to become a lawyer or teacher, he now aims to pursue carpentry or construction due to employment barriers faced by ex-offenders. He highlighted challenges such as overcrowding and emotional strain, but emphasised the importance of educational support, family encouragement, and access to learning resources. Mduduzi regards education as essential to rehabilitation and advocates for compulsory education and skills training as part of parole preparation.

1.9 Structure of the Chapters

This thesis is organised into five chapters. A brief overview of each chapter is provided below to guide the reader through the structure and progression of the study.

Chapter 2 presents the literature review. It begins by examining the legislative and policy landscape governing correctional education in South Africa, with particular attention to incarcerated youth. This is followed by a review of relevant empirical literature from both international and national sources on prison education and rehabilitation. The chapter concludes by outlining the conceptual framework that informs and underpins the study.

Chapter 3 details the research methodology employed in the study. It outlines the research paradigm, design, and qualitative approach, and describes the processes of data generation and analysis. The chapter also discusses the data collection tools used and addresses ethical considerations relevant to conducting research in correctional settings.

Chapter 4 presents and analyses the findings derived from in-depth semi-structured

interviews with the participants. The findings are organised into themes that emerged from the data and are discussed in relation to the study's research questions and conceptual framework.

Chapter 5 concludes the thesis by synthesising the key findings of the study. It presents the conclusions drawn from participants' educational experiences while incarcerated, offers recommendations for policy and practice, and suggests directions for future research.

1.10 Chapter Summary

This chapter provided an overview of the study and establishes the foundational context for the research. It outlined the background and context of the study, with particular attention to the nature and purpose of correctional education in both South African and international contexts, especially as it relates to incarcerated youth. The chapter articulated the focus, purpose, and aims of the study, and clearly set out the research questions and objectives guiding the inquiry. In addition, the chapter introduced the research participants and provided an overview of the theoretical and methodological orientation of the study. It concluded by outlining the structure of the dissertation and briefly describing the content of each subsequent chapter.

Building on this foundation, Chapter 2 reviews the relevant legislative, policy, and empirical literature on correctional education and youth incarceration, situates the study within existing scholarship, and identifies the theoretical and empirical gaps that the present research seeks to address.

2. CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW AND CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

2.1 Introduction

Education within correctional settings is widely recognised as a critical intervention for addressing the complex socio-economic, psychological, and developmental needs of incarcerated youth. For young people in South African correctional centres preparing for the NSC examination, education represents not only a pathway to formal academic qualifications but also a potential mechanism for reducing recidivism, fostering personal development, and enhancing prospects for successful reintegration into society (Rucker, 2025). International scholarship consistently positions prison education as a rehabilitative strategy that supports reintegration and improves post-release life outcomes (Flynn & Higdon, 2022; Rangel Torrijo & De Maeyer, 2019). Crucially, such programmes are most effective when they are responsive to the developmental stages, emotional needs, and disrupted educational trajectories that characterise the lives of incarcerated youth (Manger et al., 2010; Herbig & Hesselink, 2012).

Within the South African context, correctional education is underpinned by a progressive constitutional framework that guarantees the right to education for all individuals, including those who are incarcerated (Republic of South Africa, 1996). The DCS, in collaboration with the Department of Basic Education (DBE), is mandated to implement the NSC programme within correctional centres. Despite this policy commitment, the implementation of correctional education remains uneven across provinces, resulting in significant disparities in access, quality, and completion rates. In KwaZulu-Natal, these challenges are exacerbated by persistent overcrowding, limited resources, infrastructural constraints, and linguistic diversity, all of which shape the educational experiences of incarcerated learners (Department of Correctional Services, 2021; Ovens & Prinsloo, 2022).

Against this backdrop, this chapter provides a critical review of relevant international and national empirical literature on the educational experiences of incarcerated

youth participating in formal education programmes. The review is organised thematically to examine five key areas: (1) education as a fundamental human right for incarcerated youth; (2) the demographic and socio-educational backgrounds of young people in correctional institutions; (3) the nature and structure of educational provision within correctional settings, including systemic constraints; (4) barriers to accessing and succeeding in education while incarcerated; and (5) support mechanisms, learner agency, and resilience in promoting educational engagement and achievement. While the review draws primarily on South African scholarship, particular attention is given to the KwaZulu-Natal context where relevant, and international literature is incorporated to provide comparative insights and highlight innovative practices applicable to correctional education.

2.2 Education as an Inalienable Right for Incarcerated Youth

This section examines the legislative and policy frameworks that inform the provision of education within correctional settings. It begins by tracing the influence of international human rights instruments on South African legislation and policy, before critically examining how these commitments are interpreted and implemented within the national correctional education landscape.

2.2.1 International Frameworks on the Right to Education

Since its establishment in 1945, the United Nations (UN) has consistently affirmed education as a fundamental human right. This principle was formally articulated in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) of 1948, which states in Article 26(1) that "everyone has the right to education," thereby positioning education as a universal and inalienable entitlement (United Nations, 1948). While the UDHR provides a broad normative foundation, subsequent international legal instruments have sought to extend and operationalise this right for historically marginalised groups, including incarcerated populations.

The International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR), adopted in 1966 and entering into force in 1976, reinforces states' obligations to ensure access to

free and inclusive education. It emphasises the role of education in promoting the "full development of the human personality and the sense of its dignity" (ICESCR, 1966, Article 13). It affirms the universal application of this right, including to individuals deprived of their liberty (UNESCO, 2017). Similarly, the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR, 1966) acknowledges the interrelationship between education, rehabilitation, and reintegration, recognising that general human rights provisions alone are insufficient to address the specific circumstances and needs of incarcerated individuals.

In response to these limitations, the UN has adopted targeted frameworks aimed specifically at correctional contexts. Notably, the United Nations Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) Resolution of 1990 asserts that education in prison should focus on the holistic development of the individual, taking into account prisoners' social, economic, and cultural backgrounds. The resolution further stipulates that all incarcerated individuals should have access to a broad range of educational opportunities, including literacy programmes, basic education, vocational training, and cultural and creative activities, while also encouraging community involvement to facilitate reintegration upon release (ECOSOC, 1990).

These principles were further consolidated through the adoption of the Standard Minimum Rules for the Treatment of Prisoners, commonly known as the Nelson Mandela Rules, in 2015. These rules establish minimum international standards for the humane treatment of prisoners. Rule 4(2) explicitly identifies education as a core component of rehabilitation. On the other hand, Rule 104 requires that educational programmes be responsive to the individual needs of prisoners, with particular attention to young inmates (UN, 2015). Collectively, these international instruments affirm that education in correctional settings is not a discretionary privilege but a fundamental human right essential to dignity, personal development, and effective reintegration into society (Costelloe & Warner, 2014; Rangel Torrijo & De Maeyer, 2019).

2.2.2 The South African Constitutional and Legal Landscape

South Africa's commitment to these international human rights principles is firmly

embedded in its constitutional framework. Section 29(1)(a) of the Constitution guarantees the right to basic education for all individuals, including those who are incarcerated. This right has been affirmed as immediately realisable and legally enforceable by the Constitutional Court, notably in Grootboom v Minister of Education (2001), which confirmed the state's obligation to progressively realise access to education, particularly for vulnerable and marginalised groups. This constitutional protection explicitly extends to youth held in correctional facilities.

Complementing this constitutional mandate, the Correctional Services Act No. 111 of 1998 and the White Paper on Corrections in South Africa (2005) reconceptualise correctional centres as spaces of rehabilitation and moral regeneration rather than solely as sites of punishment (Republic of South Africa, 1998; 2005). These legislative instruments require the DCS to facilitate rehabilitation by providing access to formal education responsive to offenders' educational needs (Bruyns & Nieuwenhuizen, 2003; Muthaphuli, 2008).

The DBE plays a central role in this process through the implementation of the National Curriculum Statement (NCS) and the administration of the NSC examinations. This collaboration seeks to ensure that educational provision in correctional centres aligns with national schooling standards, thereby enabling incarcerated youth to pursue qualifications equivalent to those of learners in mainstream schools (Department of Basic Education, 2019). In principle, this alignment represents a significant policy achievement. In practice, however, research suggests that implementation remains uneven and, in many cases, symbolic rather than substantive (Le Roux, 2014; Muthaphuli, 2008).

2.2.3 Critiques of Policy Implementation in South Africa

Despite South Africa's progressive constitutional and legislative framework, a substantial gap persists between policy intentions and the lived educational experiences of incarcerated youth. Scholars have consistently highlighted systemic challenges that undermine effective implementation, including inadequate infrastructure, insufficient teaching staff, and limited institutional capacity (Segalo & Sihlobo, 2021). Magano

(2016) further observes that the quality of academic support within correctional centres often depends on the commitment of individual educators rather than on coordinated, system-wide provision.

The dominance of a custodial prison culture continues to constrain the realisation of a rights- based approach to education, frequently subordinating educational objectives to security imperatives (Luyt, 2008; Omar, 2011). In provinces such as KwaZulu-Natal and the Eastern Cape, education is still frequently perceived as a secondary or discretionary service rather than as a fundamental right. This perception is reinforced by chronic underfunding, staff shortages, administrative inefficiencies, and weak interdepartmental coordination (Jansen van Vuuren, 2020; Muntingh & Ballard, 2012). Poor alignment between the DCS and the DBE has further contributed to inconsistent curriculum delivery, disrupted learning processes, and inadequate learner support (Mdletye et al., 2014).

Taken together, these critiques highlight the tension between South Africa's strong rights-based policy framework and the realities of correctional education practice. They highlight the need for empirical research that foregrounds the perspectives of incarcerated youth themselves to better understand how these policy commitments are experienced, negotiated, and, at times, undermined within correctional settings.

Overall, the literature affirms that education is a fundamental human right that applies equally to incarcerated youth, forming a key pillar of rehabilitation and reintegration. However, much of this scholarship focuses on policy ideals rather than the lived realities of youth preparing for the NSC within South African correctional centres. This study contributes to addressing this gap by examining how this right is enacted, constrained, or undermined within the specific context of correctional education in KwaZulu-Natal.

2.3 Profile of Incarcerated Youth

A clear understanding of the demographic, social, and educational characteristics of incarcerated youth is essential for the development of responsive and equitable educational programmes within correctional settings. This section draws on national and

international empirical literature to construct a contextual profile of incarcerated youth, with particular attention to race, class, gender, pre-incarceration experiences, and the factors that shape educational engagement during incarceration.

2.3.1 Demographics and Socio-Economic Characteristics

The majority of incarcerated youth in South Africa originate from historically marginalised and under-resourced communities (Marqua-Harries, Stewart & Padayachee, 2019). According to the Department of Correctional Services (Department of Correctional Services, 2021), a significant proportion of incarcerated young people are Black males between the ages of 18 and 25. Their life trajectories are often shaped by systemic inequality, intergenerational poverty, and sustained exposure to crime and violence (Artz et al., 2016; Mabeba & Rolland, 2019; Samuels, 2010).

These patterns are not unique to South Africa. International research reveals similar trends, with Indigenous youth in Australia and African American and Latino youth in the United States disproportionately represented in correctional institutions (Cunneen, 2018; Sawyer, 2019; Mallett, 2015). Such trends point to the enduring influence of racialised and unequal justice systems that intersect with broader socio-economic disadvantage (Shaw, 2013; Allen & White-Smith, 2014). Table 2.1 below shows the number of inmates as of 31 March 2025 per region.

Figure 2.1: Number of inmates as of 31 March 2025 per region (DCS Annual Report 2024/25

Region	Sentenced Offenders			Unsentenced Inmates			Total number of Inmates
	Males	Females	Total	Males	Females	Total	
EC	13 772	305	**14 077**	7 097	155	**7 252**	**21 329**
FSNC	15 269	375	**15 644**	6 963	242	**7 205**	**22 849**
GP	21 632	1 153	**22 785**	16 882	914	**17 796**	**40 581**
KZN	17 538	531	**18 069**	7 863	286	**8 149**	**26 218**
LMN	18 091	585	**18 676**	6 969	263	**7 232**	**25 908**
WC	14 445	421	**14 866**	13 699	558	**14 257**	**29 123**
TOTAL	**100 747**	**3 370**	**104 117**	**59 473**	**2 418**	**61 891**	**166 008**

The table illustrates the prison population before 31 March 2025 and shows gender

disparities, with males comprising the majority of inmates across all regions.

Table 2.1: Number of sentenced offenders per age group as of 31 March 2025 (DCS Annual Report 2024/25)

NUMBER OF SENTENCED OFFENDERS PER AGE GROUP AS OF 31 MARCH 2025					
CHILDREN	JUVENILES	YOUTH	ADULTS	ELDERLY	TOTAL SENTENCED
(Less than 18 years)	(18-21 years)	(22-25 years)	(26 - 59 years)	(Sixty years and above)	
0	39	87	2 029	357	**8 079**

Data from the DCS Annual Report (2024/25) further illustrates these demographic patterns. As shown in Table 2.2, youth aged 22 to 25 constitute a substantial proportion of sentenced offenders, with 357 females and 8,079 males, for a total of 8,436 individuals. This age group reflects a marked increase in incarceration compared to juveniles, suggesting that early adulthood represents a particularly vulnerable period for involvement in criminal activity, especially among males. Overall, males comprise approximately 97% of the incarcerated population, while females account for about 3% (Department of Correctional Services, 2025).

Regional disparities are also evident. Gauteng and KwaZulu-Natal record the highest numbers of incarcerated individuals, reflecting the influence of urbanisation, economic inequality, and population density on incarceration trends. These findings are consistent with earlier research linking youth incarceration to poverty, unemployment, limited educational access, and high school dropout rates, particularly in rural areas and informal settlements (Burton, 2006; Stats SA, 2016).

The enduring legacy of apartheid-era spatial segregation further exacerbates these disparities. Communities historically subjected to marginalisation continue to experience limited access to quality education, healthcare, and economic opportunities, reinforcing cycles of exclusion and incarceration (Spaull, 2013; Luyt, 2008). While incarceration is predominantly experienced by young men, gender remains a critical dimension in understanding justice system involvement. Young women in correctional facilities often

face distinct challenges, including histories of sexual abuse, domestic violence, early pregnancy, and limited access to reproductive health services (Covington, 2002; Artz et al., 2016; Daniels, 2023). International studies similarly indicate that incarcerated young women are more likely to report trauma and mental health challenges (Isiaka & Adewuyi, 2020; Honorato, 2022; Barros Filho et al., 2023).

2.3.2 Educational Backgrounds: Interrupted Schooling and Disengagement

A substantial proportion of incarcerated youth have experienced significant educational disruption before their entry into the correctional system. Research indicates that exclusion from schooling often precedes incarceration, as learners who disengage or are pushed out of school environments may become more vulnerable to criminal involvement (Prinsloo & Moletsane, 2013; Skelton & Frank, 2016). Interrupted schooling should therefore be understood not merely as an educational concern, but as part of a broader pathway into the criminal justice system.

Magano's (2016) study of juvenile offenders highlights that many incarcerated learners had incomplete or fragmented schooling histories, underscoring the link between educational marginalisation and antisocial behaviour. In this context, education within correctional facilities plays a remedial role, attempting to address educational gaps that contributed to incarceration in the first place.

National data support these findings. The General Household Survey (Statistics South Africa, 2023) indicates that school dropout rates increase significantly after the age of 14, particularly between Grades 7 and 9. Structural challenges within the South African education system, including overcrowded classrooms, teacher shortages, and inadequate infrastructure, have been identified as key contributors to poor learning outcomes and early school leaving, especially in disadvantaged communities (Spaull, 2015). These patterns are reflected in correctional settings, where prison education becomes a crucial mechanism for rehabilitation and reintegration (Luyt, 2008).

Educational inequality in South Africa is deeply rooted in the country's historical and

socio- economic context (De Clercq, 2020). These inequalities contribute to what has been described as a "school-to-prison pipeline," whereby systemic educational failures increase the likelihood of marginalised youth becoming involved in criminal activity (Wald & Losen, 2003; Flynn & Higdon, 2022). Compounding this issue is the prevalence of undiagnosed learning disabilities among incarcerated youth. A meta-analysis by Livanou et al. (2019) found that between 23% and 32% of incarcerated youth internationally present with learning disabilities, compared to only 2-4% in the general population. While South African quantitative data remains limited, qualitative studies suggest that learning barriers often go unidentified and unsupported in both mainstream schools and correctional education contexts (Leoschut, 2009; Murhula & Singh, 2019).

In correctional learning environments, these challenges are intensified by limited access to specialised educators, language barriers, emotional and behavioural difficulties, and the stigma associated with incarceration. Research further indicates that many incarcerated learners experience educational spaces as isolating or unresponsive to their lived realities. Magano (2016) and Costelloe (2014) argue that the absence of culturally relevant curricula contributes to disengagement, low motivation, and poor retention. In KwaZulu-Natal, Khanyile and Awung (2023) highlight language as a key factor contributing to educational alienation, noting that instruction in isiZulu is often limited to early grades, leaving older learners to struggle academically in second-language learning environments.

2.3.3 Focus on the Province of KwaZulu-Natal

KwaZulu-Natal is home to one of the largest populations of incarcerated youth in South Africa, yet it remains underrepresented in correctional education research (Department of Correctional Services, 2024). As of 31 March 2025, the province recorded 731 youth offenders aged 18 to 25 housed in two designated youth correctional facilities, slightly exceeding the approved bed capacity of 717. Nationally, this population stood at 5,081 youth offenders.

Correctional facilities in KwaZulu-Natal face multiple educational challenges, including overcrowding, inadequate infrastructure, shortages of qualified educators, and limited

access to learning resources. These constraints significantly affect the quality and consistency of educational provision (DCS, 2024). Mbanjwa and Johnson (2018) found that incarcerated learners in the province reported anxiety related to meeting NSC requirements, alongside limited academic and psychosocial support, which negatively affected motivation and concentration.

Similarly, Jones et al. (2022) reported that incarcerated youth emphasised the importance of structured learning environments and individualised academic attention, noting that existing programmes often failed to meet their educational and rehabilitative needs. Earlier research by Ngubane (2007) at Westville Prison highlighted weak coordination between education staff and correctional officials, inconsistent teaching practices, and limited communication, all of which disrupted learning.

Operational challenges such as lockdowns, restricted movement, and poor communication between programme developers and correctional staff further limit access to classes and tailored academic support (Edwards, 2021). Mbatha (2024) adds that teaching in KwaZulu- Natal correctional facilities remains largely teacher-centred, with limited application of andragogical (adult learning) approaches that promote learner autonomy and self-directed learning. As a result, educators are often unable to adequately respond to the diverse learning needs of incarcerated youth.

Collectively, these findings underscore the need for context-specific policy responses and further empirical research that foregrounds the educational experiences of incarcerated youth in KwaZulu-Natal. Such research is significant for understanding how young learners preparing for the NSC navigate correctional education environments characterised by both opportunity and constraint.

The reviewed literature above consistently highlights the complex social, economic, and educational vulnerabilities experienced by incarcerated youth prior to imprisonment. Yet, few studies explore how these background factors directly shape the experiences of youth engaging in formal schooling while incarcerated, particularly at NSC level (Metsing, 2018). This study fills this gap by analysing how learners' biographies

intersect with institutional conditions to influence their educational engagement and aspirations.

2.4 Education Provision and Challenges in the Corrections Centre

Education within correctional facilities is widely recognised as a key instrument for rehabilitation and reintegration (Gumi, 2014). Although both national and international frameworks mandate access to education for incarcerated individuals, the actual provision of educational programmes in South African correctional centres, particularly for youth, remains uneven and fragmented. This section examines the structure and delivery of correctional education, with a specific focus on learning resources, teacher capacity, technology use, and selected international comparisons.

2.4.1 The Interplay of Learning Resources and Teacher Capacity in Enhancing Educational Outcomes

The effectiveness of correctional education is closely linked to the quality of teaching and the availability of appropriate learning resources. In South Africa, correctional centres continue to experience significant shortages in both areas. Research indicates that many educators working in correctional settings are inadequately prepared for the demands of teaching incarcerated learners (Muntingh, 2008; Davis, 2013; Muthivhi & Ranko-Ramaili, 2017). In many cases, educators lack formal teaching qualifications, subject-specific expertise, or specialised training for working within correctional environments.

The absence of targeted training reflects limited recognition of the complexities involved in educating learners who have experienced disrupted schooling, trauma, and social marginalisation. Consequently, educators often struggle to identify trauma-related behaviours and to adapt pedagogical strategies to meet diverse learner needs. Comparable challenges have been recognised internationally. For example, Thomas and Glazzard (2025), in a study conducted in the United Kingdom, highlight unequal access to education, unstable learning environments, and insufficient learner support as key barriers to inclusive prison education. They further note a shortage of qualified educators

and limited professional development opportunities for prison teachers.

Gearhart's (2021) study within the Pennsylvania Department of Corrections similarly found that many correctional educators felt unprepared for the realities of teaching in prison settings. Participants emphasised the need for structured professional development and institutional support. In contrast, countries such as Norway and the United Kingdom recognise correctional teaching as a specialised professional field. In these contexts, educators receive structured training and formal qualifications tailored to correctional education (Johnsen, 2015; Warner, 2017). Kaatrakoski (2022) reports that in Norway, professional development for correctional educators extends beyond subject knowledge to include communication skills, mental health awareness, and pedagogical approaches suited to prison environments.

In South Africa, challenges related to teaching capacity are compounded by inadequate learning resources. Studies consistently report delays in textbook delivery, insufficient quantities of learning materials, and the use of outdated content (Luyt, 2008; Windhauser, 2020). These constraints disrupt continuity of learning and limit learners' ability to revise independently or prepare effectively for examinations. As a result, learner motivation declines and instructional quality is compromised (Mdletye et al., 2014). In KwaZulu-Natal, shortages of essential resources such as dictionaries and scientific calculators further disadvantage learners preparing for the NSC examinations (Ovens & Prinsloo, 2022).

Internationally, correctional education systems in countries such as Germany and Canada provide access to well-resourced libraries and, in some cases, controlled digital learning platforms (Costelloe & Warner, 2014; Flynn & Higdon, 2022). Even in lower-income contexts, such as Kenya and Nigeria, partnerships with non-governmental organisations have helped address resource constraints through innovative educational initiatives (Odunsi, 2017; Ohiomah & Efejuku, 2024). By comparison, the South African correctional education system continues to lag, reflecting an approach that prioritises security over rehabilitation. Strengthening both educator development and resource provision is therefore essential if correctional education is to fulfil its rehabilitative

mandate.

2.4.2 Technology and Digital Learning

Technology has become an integral component of contemporary education; however, correctional facilities remain essentially digitally excluded learning environments (Farley, 2015). A scoping review by Barros et al. (2023), drawing on 66 studies from various countries, found that incarcerated learners face substantial barriers to accessing digital learning platforms. These barriers limit engagement with educational content and restrict opportunities to develop digital skills necessary for participation in modern society.

Several scholars argue that limited access to digital tools and information and communication technologies (ICTs) creates a structural contradiction: individuals most in need of digital skills for post-release reintegration are those least able to acquire them while incarcerated (Johnson, 2021; Järveläinen & Rantanen, 2021). Digital exclusion thus reinforces existing social and economic inequalities.

Despite growing recognition of the benefits of educational technology in correctional settings, its implementation remains constrained by infrastructural limitations and security concerns (Jansen van Vuuren, 2020). Pike and Adams (2012) demonstrate that the absence of digital resources diminishes learner motivation and engagement. Conversely, studies from the United States suggest that the introduction of tablets and controlled digital access can support independent learning, improve access to educational and mental health resources, and strengthen family connections, thereby reducing recidivism (Ruth & Sosorburam, 2022).

International examples further illustrate that secure digital access is possible within correctional environments. Nordic countries utilise monitored intranet systems, while Portugal has implemented regulated digital platforms that balance educational access with security requirements (Johnsen, 2015; Tønseth & Bergsland, 2019; Machado et al., 2023). These models demonstrate that technology can be integrated responsibly into correctional education.

In South Africa, however, access to digital technology in correctional education remains extremely limited. Most correctional centres prohibit internet-enabled devices, even for subjects such as Computer Applications Technology (CAT), where digital access is essential (Mahlangu, 2024). This restriction contributes to continued exclusion from the digital economy (Adeyeye, 2019). Nevertheless, emerging research highlights the need for context- sensitive approaches. Mdakane et al. (2024), for example, found that incarcerated distance- learning students experience significant challenges due to restricted internet access and limited access to digital devices. Their study emphasises the importance of designing learner support systems that acknowledge the realities of correctional environments, including limited connectivity and varying levels of digital literacy.

Similarly, Mahlangu (2023) argues that digitally mediated education can provide incarcerated learners with a sense of purpose, support skill development, and enhance preparedness for post-release life. Overall, existing literature suggests that digital technology has the potential to improve learning outcomes, support reintegration, and reduce recidivism in correctional settings (Dias-Trindade & Moreira, 2020; Smith, 2020; Arevalo & Epp, 2025). However, realising these benefits in South Africa will require a shift in policy and practice that recognises technology not primarily as a security threat, but as a critical resource for rehabilitation and transformation.

The existing studies above reveal that education provision in correctional centres is often marked by inconsistent resources, restrictive routines, and institutional limitations that impede effective teaching and learning. However, most research remains descriptive and seldom captures how these structural challenges are experienced or navigated by learners preparing for high-stakes assessments like the NSC. This study addresses this gap by examining learners' narratives to show how institutional conditions shape, enable, or constrain their educational participation.

2.5 Barriers to Educational Access and Success

Access to education in correctional settings can support personal development,

rehabilitation, and successful reintegration into society (Chauke, 2025). Despite supportive national and international policy frameworks, the delivery of education in South African correctional centres, particularly for youth, remains uneven and fragmented. This section examines the key barriers that constrain educational access and success in correctional environments, with particular attention to institutional priorities, security practices, and structural conditions that shape learners' experiences.

2.5.1 Institutional Level Barriers: Security vs Education

Correctional centres are primarily designed to fulfil custodial and security functions rather than to operate as educational environments (Samuels et al., 2024). As a result, educational activities are frequently subordinated to security imperatives and operational demands. Strict security measures, including lockdowns, routine cell searches, and restrictions on movement, often disrupt scheduled classes or prevent learners from attending educational programmes altogether (Luyt, 2008; Muntingh & Ballard, 2012).

In their report Children in Prison in South Africa, Muntingh and Ballard (2012) document widespread challenges across 41 correctional facilities, including limited access to education and recreational services, inadequate staff training, poor living conditions, and restricted family contact. These constraints undermine curriculum continuity, reduce learner motivation, and create unstable learning environments. Ovens and Prinsloo (2022) further note that classes are frequently cancelled without notice, often due to staff shortages or disciplinary interventions involving either inmates or correctional personnel. Such disruptions introduce uncertainty into the learning process and contribute to disengagement, particularly in programmes that rely on sustained participation and continuity.

The tension between custodial responsibilities and educational objectives is not unique to South Africa. Research from other African contexts highlights similar challenges. In Tanzania, Findsen and Barnes (2020) report that bureaucratic procedures, overcrowding, and weak policy implementation significantly limit access to prison education. Their study reveals that many correctional officials were unfamiliar with key education policy documents, leading to delays or denials of permission for inmates to write national

examinations. In some facilities, the lack of classrooms forced teaching to take place outdoors, in unsuitable conditions.

Comparable findings emerge from Malawi, where Kajawo and Johnson (2023) question whether the right to education in correctional settings is meaningfully realised or merely symbolically acknowledged. Their research indicates that security concerns routinely override educational priorities, with limited staff training and motivation to support learning initiatives. In such contexts, education is treated as a privilege rather than a right, particularly for young offenders.

Although South Africa's White Paper on Corrections (2005) positions education as central to rehabilitation, the prevailing institutional culture continues to prioritise discipline and security. Several scholars have identified persistent gaps between policy commitments and implementation, citing rigid administrative systems and securitised prison environments as significant obstacles to effective educational delivery (Le Roux, 2014; Segalo & Sihlobo, 2021; Mafilika & Marongwe, 2024). Addressing these challenges requires a shift in institutional orientation, supported by targeted staff training, improved coordination, and administrative reforms that recognise education as a core rehabilitative function rather than an ancillary activity (Schaefer, 2018).

2.5.2 Structural Barriers: Overcrowding

Overcrowding represents a significant structural barrier that undermines both educational provision and broader rehabilitation efforts within correctional facilities (Nkosi & Maweni, 2020). Extensive research demonstrates that overcrowding places pressure on infrastructure, limits access to educational spaces, disrupts instructional time, and exacerbates violence and psychological distress among inmates. Olaya et al. (2018) argue that overcrowding should be understood as a consequence of punitive criminal justice policies that prioritise incarceration over alternative sentencing approaches.

International studies reinforce this perspective. Woods (2015) and Sudaryono (2020) show that inflexible sentencing laws, prolonged pretrial detention, and limited judicial alternatives contribute to chronic overcrowding in correctional facilities in Latin America

and Indonesia. These conditions restrict states' capacity to provide meaningful rehabilitative and educational interventions.

Empirical evidence also links overcrowding to adverse institutional outcomes. Dhillon (2023) identifies a significant association between overcrowding and increased incidents of violence in United States prisons, highlighting the risks posed by high-density conditions. From a human rights perspective, Cliquennois and Birch (2020) note that the European Court of Human Rights has repeatedly ruled that overcrowded prison conditions violate Article 3 of the European Convention, underscoring their incompatibility with humane treatment and rehabilitation.

In the South African context, Nkosi and Maweni (2020) found that overcrowding at the Westville Correctional Centre in KwaZulu-Natal limited access to classrooms, reduced instructional time, and restricted opportunities for individualised academic support. These constraints weakened the effectiveness of educational programmes and compromised learner engagement. Overcrowding also has long-term implications for reintegration. Legodi and Dube (2023) demonstrate that inmates in overcrowded rural prisons are often excluded from vocational and educational programmes, leaving them inadequately prepared for life after release.

Furthermore, overcrowded environments negatively affect learners' mental and physical well-being. Baffour et al. (2024) argue that such conditions increase stress, exposure to illness, and the likelihood of violence, all of which diminish learners' ability to concentrate, participate meaningfully, and remain motivated. Taken together, the literature indicates that overcrowding is not merely a logistical challenge but a fundamental structural barrier that undermines the objectives of correctional education and rehabilitation.

The literature identifies numerous barriers, including overcrowding, limited instructional time, inadequate materials, and psychosocial pressures that hinder the educational progress of incarcerated youth. Nonetheless, as evident above, little empirical work investigates how these barriers manifest within the NSC preparation process or how

learners interpret and respond to them (Mafilika & Marongwe, 2024). This study extends existing scholarship by analysing the specific barriers encountered in one KwaZulu-Natal correctional centre and how these shape learners' educational experiences.

2.6 Success Factors and Support Systems that Promote Agency and Resilience

Despite the significant structural and institutional challenges faced by incarcerated youth, a growing body of research demonstrates that many young people display resilience, perseverance, and academic success during their incarceration (Mahlangu, 2024). This section reviews the literature on factors that promote agency and resilience among incarcerated youth, including peer support, teacher involvement, family engagement, and learners' individual agency. Collectively, these success factors illustrate that education within correctional settings can function as a catalyst for personal transformation and social reintegration, even in highly constrained environments (Mishra & Mishra, 2017).

2.6.1 Peer Support and Collaborative Learning

Peer support has emerged as a significant factor in promoting educational engagement and resilience among incarcerated youth. In a KwaZulu-Natal study by Prinsloo and Moletsane (2013), participants described forming collaborative study groups and sharing learning materials as strategies for coping with limited instructional support. Similarly, research conducted in the Western Cape found that incarcerated learners frequently tutored one another in challenging subjects, fostering peer-to-peer learning and academic cooperation (Samuels & Liebenberg, 2020). These informal learning communities fostered a sense of belonging and mutual accountability, helping counteract the isolation commonly experienced in correctional environments.

The role of peer support extends beyond academic assistance. Studies indicate that collaborative learning environments enable incarcerated youth to develop social and emotional resilience, build trust, and exercise positive leadership skills (Parry, 2024). International research supports these findings. In Australia and Belgium, structured peer tutoring programmes have been shown to enhance learner motivation, reduce

disciplinary incidents, and strengthen classroom culture (Brosens et al., 2019; Warner, 2017). Such programmes emphasise shared responsibility and mutual respect, aligning with restorative approaches to education.

Comparable patterns have been observed in South Africa, particularly where educators encourage peer mentorship and collaborative problem-solving (Magano, 2016; Mwedzi, 2024; Parry, 2024). For example, Mwedzi (2024) found that community-based peer mentoring significantly improved academic outcomes in contexts with limited formal teaching time. Peer mentors not only supported academic understanding but also served as role models, demonstrating perseverance and discipline.

Mentorship within correctional contexts has also been shown to support reintegration. Mbambo (2002) highlights the remedial, preventative, and developmental functions of peer mentorship within the child justice system. Such networks are particularly valuable in overcrowded facilities or where access to educators is inconsistent, as they help to sustain learning continuity despite institutional constraints (Bagnall et al., 2015). A systematic review by Bagnall et al. (2015), covering correctional settings across several countries, further confirms that peer education interventions are effective, cost-efficient, and well- suited to resource-limited environments. Through peer support, education becomes a collective and empowering process that enables incarcerated youth to take ownership of their learning while developing essential social and cognitive skills (Evans-Chase & Zhou, 2014; Gaskew, 2015).

2.6.2 Teachers' Role as Mentors and Advocates and Family Support

Within correctional education settings, teachers often fulfil roles that extend beyond formal instruction, acting as mentors, motivators, and advocates for incarcerated youth, many of whom have experienced trauma and educational exclusion (Mahmoudi, 2025). The commitment and presence of supportive educators can provide a powerful counter-narrative

to the marginalisation learners may have experienced in mainstream schooling (Luyt, 2008; Samuels & Liebenberg, 2020). Research consistently shows that incarcerated learners attribute their persistence and academic engagement to teachers who foster confidence, model resilience, and create safe and inclusive learning environments (Magano, 2016; Daniels, 2023).

Teacher–learner relationships grounded in care and high expectations have been associated with improved attendance, motivation, and engagement (Strnadová, O'Neill & Cumming, 2017). In this sense, teachers function as transformational agents, challenging deficit-based narratives and enabling learners to view themselves as capable and deserving of academic success (Vander & Wouder, 2024). Trauma-informed and socially responsive pedagogical approaches further enhance learner agency by recognising and addressing the broader structural inequalities that shape learners' lives (Yates et al., 2021).

Culturally relevant and learner-centred teaching practices also play a crucial role in strengthening agency. Weaver and Mutti (2021) found that when educators contextualise learning content and draw on learners' lived experiences, participation and comprehension improve significantly. Moreover, the presence of consistent, well-qualified teaching staff has been linked to higher NSC completion rates, underscoring the importance of sustained investment in teacher recruitment and professional development in correctional education (Samuels & Liebenberg, 2020).

Family support represents another critical protective factor in sustaining learners' educational engagement. Emotional connections maintained through visits, letters, and phone calls provide incarcerated youth with a sense of belonging, continuity, and motivation (Folk et al., 2019; Poehlmann-Thynan, 2020). Even where financial support is limited, consistent emotional encouragement has been associated with improved educational outcomes and fewer disciplinary infractions (Blumberg & Griffin, 2013). However, barriers such as geographical distance, transport costs, and restrictive prison regulations often limit family contact (McGillivray, 2009; Peterson et al., 2019).

When in-person visitation is constrained, correctional facilities can support learners by facilitating alternative forms of communication, such as telephonic or virtual contact. Within the South African context, the involvement of families in incarcerated learners' educational journeys, through recognition of academic milestones or inclusion in educational planning, remains underdeveloped but holds significant potential for strengthening motivation and resilience (Alexander, 2024; Arditti & Johnson, 2022).

Research shows that supportive teacher–learner relationships, peer collaboration, intrinsic motivation, and structured programmes can foster resilience and agency among incarcerated learners. However, there is limited attention to how these enabling factors operate within South African correctional education, particularly in relation to NSC preparation and reintegration. This study responds to this gap by highlighting the supports and conditions that empower learners to exercise agency and construct hopeful educational identities despite systemic constraints.

The following section outlines the conceptual framework that guides the analysis of the data in this study.

2.7 Conceptual Framework

2.7.1 Introduction to the Conceptual Framework

This study is guided by Paulo Freire's Pedagogy of the Oppressed (1970) and selected concepts from critical theory to interpret the educational experiences of incarcerated youth preparing for the NSC examination at a correctional centre in KwaZulu-Natal. Freire's work provides a valuable lens for understanding how education can either reproduce conditions of oppression or function as a practice of freedom. Complementing this perspective, critical theorists such as Horkheimer (1972) offer insights into how power, ideology, and hegemony operate within social institutions, including education systems.

Together, these theoretical perspectives enable an examination of correctional education not only as a technical process of curriculum delivery, but also as a social and political

practice shaped by power relations, institutional control, and learners' opportunities for agency.

2.7.2 Banking and Problem-Posing Education

Freire (1970) distinguishes between banking education and problem-posing education. Banking education refers to a model in which teachers deposit knowledge into passive learners, treating them as empty vessels rather than active participants in knowledge production. This approach prioritises memorisation, compliance, and repetition, while discouraging questioning and critical engagement (Freire, 1970; Giroux, 2011).

In correctional environments, banking education is often reinforced by tightly regulated institutional structures and disciplinary regimes (Wilson et al., 2003). When teaching is dominated by examination preparation and performance metrics, incarcerated learners may experience education as an extension of punishment rather than as an opportunity for growth (Costelloe & Warner, 2014). In South Africa, the high-stakes nature of the NSC examination already exerts strong "washback" effects, encouraging teaching practices focused on rote learning and past examination papers rather than conceptual understanding (Spaull, 2013; Pompoco et al., 2017). Within prison contexts, these pressures can further entrench banking approaches that emphasise obedience and control over meaningful engagement.

In contrast, problem-posing education positions learners as co-creators of knowledge who engage in dialogue with teachers to critically examine their realities and work towards transformation (Freire, 1970). Rather than passively receiving information, learners are encouraged to question, interpret, and act upon their experiences (Hooks, 1994). Research on dialogic and participatory programmes in correctional settings demonstrates the transformative potential of this approach. Bhatti (2010) found that when incarcerated learners connected academic content to their lived experiences, they began to re-author their identities as thinkers and learners. Similarly, Costelloe and Warner (2014) report that dialogic reading groups in European prisons fostered critical reflection, motivation, and mutual respect.

These findings suggest that when the NSC curriculum is taught through problem-posing approaches that engage incarcerated youth in discussions of issues such as inequality, unemployment, and social justice, they can develop both examination competence and critical awareness. The tension between banking and problem-posing education is therefore central to understanding whether NSC provision in correctional centres supports learner agency or merely reinforces institutional control.

2.7.3 Dehumanisation, Humanisation and Power

Freire (1970) conceptualises dehumanisation as a condition in which individuals are treated as objects rather than as thinking, acting as people capable of shaping their reality.

Dehumanisation is both a product of oppression and a mechanism through which oppression is sustained. Scholars such as Liebling (2004) and Wacquant (2009) argue that prisons are inherently dehumanising institutions, structured to limit autonomy, privacy, and social identity through practices such as numbering, uniformity, and strict surveillance.

Within correctional systems, incarcerated individuals are often framed as "risks" or "cases" rather than as learners or citizens, reinforcing feelings of shame and social exclusion (Alexander, 2015; Dissel, 2008). In such contexts, education may be experienced as an additional form of control, particularly when learning spaces are heavily monitored, or attendance is driven by compliance rather than engagement (Fine et al., 2013; Reuss, 2001). These dynamics can undermine learners' confidence and discourage active participation in NSC classes.

In contrast, humanisation refers to educational practices that affirm learners' dignity and recognise them as capable subjects able to know, decide, and act (Freire, 1970). Freire argues that humanising education must be grounded in respect, humility, and hope, enabling learners to see themselves as valued participants in the learning process. Research in prison education supports this view. Costelloe and Warner (2014) and Farley and Hopkins (2019) demonstrate that when teachers build respectful relationships,

contextualise learning, and create spaces where learners feel heard, incarcerated students begin to re-imagine themselves as learners with future possibilities. Such humanising practices can significantly shape how NSC learners engage with education and perceive their own academic potential.

2.7.4 Dialogue, Praxis and Agency

Dialogue is a central component of Freire's pedagogy and refers to an engaged, respectful exchange between teachers and learners aimed at understanding and transforming oppressive realities (Freire, 1970; Freire, 1998). Dialogue is not merely conversation, but a relational process grounded in mutual respect and commitment to truth (Hooks, 1994). Although prison environments often restrict dialogue due to security concerns and hierarchical structures, research indicates that dialogic spaces can meaningfully enhance learning.

Studies by Simpson (2022) and Felson and Todorović (2021) show that dialogic and creative learning programmes in prisons enable learners to share experiences, challenge stereotypes, and deepen understanding. In NSC classrooms, dialogue can support incarcerated youth in clarifying concepts, asking questions, and linking curriculum content to their lived realities.

Dialogue is closely linked to praxis, which Freire (1970) defines as the combination of reflection and action aimed at changing the world. In correctional education, praxis may occur when learners critically reflect on their past choices, current circumstances, and future aspirations. Research indicates that educational participation can help incarcerated individuals set new goals and reconsider their life trajectories (Davis et al., 2013; Hopkins & Farley, 2019). Large-scale studies further demonstrate that prison education is associated with reduced recidivism and improved post-release outcomes (Hill, 2015; Stickle & Schuster, 2023).

From this perspective, incarcerated youth preparing for the NSC are not simply completing a qualification, but may be engaging in forms of praxis as they use education to imagine alternative futures and assert agency within constrained circumstances.

2.7.5 Oppressor and Oppressed, Culture of Silence and Voice

Freire (1970) argues that societies are structured around relationships between oppressors and the oppressed, in which power is maintained through cultural, political, and economic mechanisms. Many incarcerated youth come from communities marked by poverty, under- resourced schools, and intensive policing, and thus encounter oppression before incarceration (McCrea et al., 2019; O'Neill et al., 2017). Within prisons, these power relations are reproduced through rigid hierarchies, limited decision-making, and authoritative control (Liebling, 2004; Wacquant, 2009).

Freire describes a culture of silence in which oppressed individuals internalise the belief that their voices are unimportant or dangerous. In correctional contexts, this silence is reinforced by formal rules and informal pressures that discourage learners from expressing difficulties or questioning educational practices (Trammell et al., 2021; Weill & Haney, 2017).

However, research suggests that educational programmes grounded in dialogue and creative expression can disrupt this silence. Potelwa and Adu (2020) found that creative arts programmes enabled incarcerated women to regain confidence and voice, while Galloway (2021) demonstrates how empowering literacy practices allow learners to articulate their own narratives and experiences of inequality.

These findings suggest that when NSC classrooms encourage reflection and expression, they can become spaces where incarcerated youth articulate critique, develop voice, and challenge deficit narratives rather than reproducing silence.

2.7.6 Reading the Word and the World, Ideology, Hegemony and False Consciousness

Freire (1970) distinguishes between reading the word, the technical ability to decode text, and reading the world, the ability to understand social realities and power relations. Marginalised learners often have limited opportunities to develop both forms of literacy

due to poverty, exclusion, and educational inequality (UNESCO, 2001). In South Africa, examination-driven instruction can exacerbate existing literacy and numeracy gaps, particularly in the senior grades (Spaull & Kotze, 2015; Fesi & Makeleni, 2020).

Critical theorists such as Gramsci (1971) argue that ideology and hegemony shape how individuals understand their circumstances, often normalising inequality. Within correctional education, dominant ideologies may frame incarceration as individual failure while obscuring structural factors such as poverty, racism, and educational disadvantage (Baumgartner, 2020; Mertanen & Brunila, 2018). Freire (1970) refers to this internalisation as false consciousness, whereby oppressed individuals come to accept blame for their marginalisation.

Problem-posing education seeks to challenge false consciousness by enabling learners to critically examine the social and structural forces shaping their lives. Through this lens, the conceptual framework highlights how NSC programmes in correctional centres can either reinforce deficit-based narratives or support incarcerated youth in developing critical awareness and imagining alternative futures.

2.8 Chapter Summary

This chapter reviewed relevant international and national literature on correctional education, with particular attention to the political and legal frameworks that shape educational provision for incarcerated youth. International perspectives were examined through key instruments, including the Nelson Mandela Rules and UNESCO guidelines. On the other hand, the South African context was explored through the Constitution and related legislation governing education and correctional services. Although the discussion focused primarily on the province of KwaZulu-Natal, international literature was drawn upon to provide comparative insights and broader contextual understanding.

In addition to legislative and policy frameworks, the chapter examined empirical studies on the educational experiences of incarcerated youth, highlighting the structural, institutional, and psychosocial factors that influence access to and the quality of education

in correctional settings. Despite South Africa's constitutional commitment to education as a fundamental human right, the literature reveals persistent gaps between policy intent and implementation, with systemic constraints and psychological barriers often limiting meaningful educational participation.

The chapter also underscored the importance of peer learning and supportive educational relationships as critical yet underutilised strategies for promoting engagement, resilience, and agency among incarcerated youth. Finally, through the conceptual framework grounded in Freirean pedagogy and critical theory, the chapter highlighted the need for youth-centred, socially just correctional education programmes that support learning-based rehabilitation and address the structural barriers faced by incarcerated learners.

Building on the theoretical and empirical insights established in this chapter, Chapter 3 outlines the research methodology employed to explore the educational experiences of incarcerated youth, detailing the research design, data generation methods, and analytical approach adopted in the study.

3. CHAPTER 3: RESEARCH METHODOLOGY AND DESIGN

3.1 Introduction

This chapter outlines the research methodology adopted in this study, which explores the factors influencing the educational experiences of incarcerated youth preparing for the NSC examinations in a correctional centre in the province of KwaZulu-Natal. In addition, the chapter examines how participants navigate these factors within the constraints and opportunities of the correctional environment.

The chapter presents and justifies the research paradigm, research design, and overall methodological approach adopted for the study. It further describes the research methods employed, including the processes of data generation and data analysis. Finally, the chapter addresses the ethical considerations underpinning the study, outlines its limitations, and discusses the strategies used to ensure the trustworthiness of the research.

3.2 Research Paradigm: The Critical Paradigm

This study is located within the critical research paradigm, drawing on principles of critical theory. The critical paradigm is underpinned by an emancipatory and transformative orientation that foregrounds the experiences of marginalised individuals and groups and challenges social inequalities (Creswell, 2007; Paradis et al., 2020). From this perspective, research is not merely concerned with describing social reality, but with interrogating and exposing the power relations that shape it, with the ultimate aim of promoting social justice (Cohen et al., 2007; Horkheimer, 1972).

Within educational research, the critical paradigm views education as both a site where dominant ideologies are reproduced and a space in which inequality can be questioned and transformed (Croucher & Cronn-Mills, 2014; Freire, 1970). This dual understanding is particularly relevant to correctional education, where learning occurs within highly regulated, hierarchical institutional contexts. The adoption of the critical paradigm, therefore, aligns with the study's aim of exploring how incarcerated youth experience

education while navigating structures of control, power, and marginalisation.

3.2.1 Ontological Assumptions

Ontologically, the critical paradigm rejects the notion of a single, objective, and universal reality. Instead, it understands reality as socially and historically constructed, shaped by power relations linked to factors such as class, race, gender, and institutional structures (Cohen et al., 2007; Pillay & Maistry, 2018). Reality is thus viewed as multiple and layered, with individuals interpreting and experiencing the world differently depending on their social positioning within relations of dominance and subordination (Paradis et al., 2020).

In this study, the educational experiences of incarcerated youth preparing for the NSC examination are understood not as neutral or purely individual experiences, but as products of the interaction between correctional practices, educational structures, and broader socio- economic conditions. These ontological assumptions informed the decision to work with eight incarcerated youth and to centre their lived experiences as multiple and equally valid realities. By foregrounding their perspectives, the study seeks to illuminate how educational experiences in correctional centres are shaped by institutional practices, policy frameworks, and dominant social narratives, and how these factors enable or constrain access to meaningful education (Cohen et al., 2007; Freire, 1970). Accordingly, what is regarded as "reality" within the correctional education context is understood as socially constructed and mediated by power, rather than as an unquestioned truth.

3.2.2 Epistemological Assumptions

Epistemologically, the critical paradigm holds that knowledge is subjective, value-laden, and shaped by ideology and power relations (Asghar, 2013; Dimock, 2021; Paradis-Gagné & Pariseau-Legault, 2022). Knowledge production is therefore not neutral, as it is influenced by the positionality, assumptions, and social contexts of both the researcher and the participants. Critical research explicitly acknowledges this subjectivity and seeks to use inquiry to critique and transform oppressive social conditions (Cohen et al., 2007;

Horkheimer, 1972).

While recognising that all knowledge is partial and situated, critical scholars argue that reflexive inquiry can lead to more inclusive and socially responsive understandings of reality (Pillay & Maistry, 2018). In this study, knowledge about the educational experiences of incarcerated youth is viewed as co-constructed through interaction between the researcher and the participants, rather than as a collection of objective facts. Centralising the narratives of eight incarcerated youth was therefore essential, as their voices are often marginalised within both correctional and educational discourses. Through their accounts, the study aims to explore how dominant beliefs, institutional practices, and power relations shape, restrict, or support their access to education within the correctional environment.

3.2.3 The Critical Paradigm in Correctional Spaces

The critical paradigm is particularly suited to research conducted within highly regulated environments such as correctional centres. Croucher and Cronn-Mills (2014) argue that critical inquiry seeks to expose how educational practices may serve the interests of those in power while marginalising vulnerable groups. Within correctional settings, education can be framed as a rehabilitative opportunity or as evidence of institutional compliance with policy directives. However, from a critical perspective, the provision of education may also function as a mechanism of control, particularly when programmes are poorly implemented or reduced to symbolic gestures that prioritise discipline over learning (Marquart et al., 1994; Higgins, 2021).

In such contexts, education risks becoming a procedural requirement rather than a meaningful opportunity for personal development and empowerment. This dynamic can further limit the ability of incarcerated youth, who are already socially and economically marginalised, to use education as a resource for transformation (Sharma, 2016). The critical paradigm, therefore, emphasises the importance of analysing how power operates within correctional education, including how correctional officials exercise authority and how institutional structures constrain learners' agency (Cohen et al., 2007).

By adopting a critical paradigm, this study seeks to examine not only the educational experiences of incarcerated youth but also how and why broader relations of power shape them. This perspective provides a foundation for understanding the educational experiences of incarcerated youth as socially situated and politically informed, rather than as isolated or individualised phenomena.

3.3 Qualitative Research

This study adopted a qualitative research approach to explore the educational experiences of incarcerated youth registered for the NSC examination within a correctional context. Qualitative research is concerned with understanding social phenomena from the perspectives of those who experience them, through the collection and analysis of rich, descriptive data that capture meanings, perceptions, and lived realities (Creswell, 2013; Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). This approach is particularly appropriate for the present study, which seeks to understand how incarcerated youth perceive, interpret, and make sense of their participation in the NSC programme while navigating the constraints of incarceration.

A defining feature of qualitative research is its emphasis on studying phenomena within their natural settings (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). In this study, data were generated within a correctional centre where participants were actively enrolled in the NSC programme and preparing for their examinations. Conducting the research in this setting enabled the educational experiences of participants to be examined within the highly regulated, securitised environment of the prison. This contextual grounding enabled exploration of how institutional routines, such as lockdowns and movement restrictions, shaped learners' access to education, study time, and interactions with educators and peers.

Another key characteristic of qualitative research is its focus on meaning and interpretation. Rather than seeking to measure or quantify experiences, qualitative inquiry aims to understand how participants construct meaning and attribute significance to their experiences (Fossey et al., 2002; Patton, 2002; Daher et al., 2017). In this study, attention was given to how incarcerated youth understood the role of education during their incarceration, the importance they attached to the NSC qualification, and how they

perceived the impact of imprisonment on their learning, motivation, and post-release aspirations. These insights were generated through in-depth, semi-structured interviews that allowed participants to reflect on their educational journeys in their own words.

Qualitative research is also concerned with process, focusing on how experiences unfold over time rather than solely on outcomes (Creswell, 2013). Accordingly, this study did not focus only on whether participants ultimately passed or failed the NSC examination. Instead, it examined the ongoing process of engaging in NSC education while incarcerated, including how learners adapted their study practices to institutional routines, how they experienced support from teachers and peers, and how their motivation and expectations evolved over the course of their incarceration.

Finally, qualitative research typically employs an inductive approach to data analysis, allowing patterns, categories, and themes to emerge from the data rather than testing predetermined hypotheses (Sandelowski, 2000). In this study, interview transcripts were read repeatedly to identify initial codes reflecting recurring aspects of participants' experiences, such as limited access to learning resources, teacher support, peer influence, stigma associated with being a learner, and perceptions of the value of the NSC for reintegration. These codes were then grouped into broader themes that captured key dimensions of the educational experiences of incarcerated youth, including learning challenges, resilience, support systems, and aspirations for life after release. This inductive, data-driven approach ensured that the analysis remained grounded in participants' lived experiences rather than being imposed by pre-existing theoretical assumptions.

3.4 Narrative Inquiry Approach

Narrative inquiry is a qualitative research approach that focuses on understanding individuals' lived experiences as they are expressed through stories (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). As Connelly and Clandinin (1990, p. 2) note, "humans are storytelling organisms who, individually and collectively, lead storied lives." Narrative inquiry is therefore both a way of understanding experience and a methodological research approach, grounded in the view that people make sense of their lives and social worlds

through narrative.

From this perspective, experience is inherently storied, and researchers engage with participants' narratives to understand how meaning is constructed over time and within specific social contexts (Clandinin, 2013). Clandinin and Rosiek (2007) emphasise that narrative inquiry attends to the interaction between personal and social conditions, as well as continuity across past, present, and future experiences. Central to this approach is the three-dimensional inquiry space of temporality, sociality, and place (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). This framework requires researchers to consider when experiences occur, how relationships and interactions shape those experiences, and where the stories are situated.

Narrative inquiry encompasses a range of practices, including life histories and personal recollections, all of which involve organising experience through story (Bell, 2003). By bringing these practices into a systematic research framework, narrative inquiry positions stories as a primary source of data for understanding meaning-making processes (Bell, 2017). Huber et al. (2013) further highlight the relational nature of narrative inquiry, noting that stories are co-constructed over time through interactions between researchers and participants, and that the researcher's own positioning forms part of the inquiry process.

In this study, narrative inquiry was employed to explore the educational experiences of incarcerated youth registered for the NSC examination. Data were generated through in-depth, semi-structured interviews that used open-ended questions to encourage participants to narrate their life stories, including the circumstances leading to their incarceration and their experiences of education within the correctional centre (Riessman & Speedy, 2006). Probing questions were used to invite elaboration, and participants were given adequate time to share their stories without interruption, in keeping with established narrative interviewing practices (Hollway & Jefferson, 2000).

Through their narratives, participants reflected on the challenges and opportunities of participating in the NSC programme, as well as their broader educational journeys and

aspirations for the future. Narrative inquiry thus enabled the collection of rich, nuanced data that captured the complexity of participants' lived experiences, foregrounded their voices, and situated their stories within the broader social and institutional context of incarceration (Anders, 2007; Ramos, 2022).

3.5 Data Generation

This section outlines the research methods employed in the study, including the study location, sampling strategy, and data generation methods. These methodological choices were informed by the study's qualitative and narrative inquiry approach. They were designed to generate rich, contextually grounded data on the educational experiences of incarcerated youth preparing for the NSC examination.

3.5.1 Study Location

The study was conducted at Perfect Correctional Centre (a pseudonym), a medium- to maximum-security correctional facility located in the eThekwini Metropolitan Municipality, KwaZulu-Natal. The centre is situated approximately 20 kilometres west of Durban's city centre along the N3 national route, within a predominantly residential area characterised by a mix of middle- and upper-income households. The broader eThekwini region is a major economic hub, with significant activity across logistics, manufacturing, retail, and services.

Perfect Correctional Centre accommodates both male and female offenders and is one of the largest correctional facilities in the province. At the time of the study, it housed over 1,200 male offenders, the majority of whom were Black South Africans, and employed more than 500 correctional staff. The centre offers a range of rehabilitative services, including formal education programmes, psychological support, skills development workshops, and recreational activities.

This correctional centre was purposively selected as the research site because it met the criteria required for the study. Specifically, it offered the NSC programme and accommodated a significant population of incarcerated youth registered for the

examination. The site therefore provided an appropriate and information-rich context for exploring the educational experiences of youth preparing for the NSC while incarcerated.

3.5.2 Sampling

This study employed purposive sampling, a commonly used and appropriate sampling strategy in qualitative research (Crossman, 2018). Purposive sampling involves deliberately selecting participants who possess specific characteristics relevant to the research questions and objectives (Saunders et al., 2012). This approach enables the researcher to focus on participants most likely to provide rich, relevant data.

Purposive sampling is particularly suitable when the researcher seeks to gain in-depth insight into a specific phenomenon and when access to participants is constrained, as is often the case in correctional settings (Crossman, 2018). The selection of participants was therefore guided by the researcher's judgement, informed by the study's focus and inclusion criteria.

The following criteria were used to recruit participants:

- Participants had to be classified as youth, defined as individuals aged between 15 and 35 years, in line with the National Youth Development Agency Act 54 of 2008.
- Participants had to be incarcerated at a correctional centre within the province of KwaZulu-Natal.
- Participants had to be registered for and preparing to write the NSC examination at the time of data generation.

In qualitative research, sample size is typically determined by the depth of inquiry rather than statistical representation (Mack, 2005; Gentles et al., 2015). Farrugia (2019) argues that smaller sample sizes allow for more detailed exploration of participants' experiences. In this study, the sample size was fixed at eight participants. This number was considered sufficient to generate rich, detailed narratives while remaining manageable within the time and access constraints of the correctional environment.

3.5.3 Conducting Semi-Structure Interviews

In-depth, semi-structured interviews were the primary data-generation method in this study. Interviews are widely recognised as a central method in qualitative research, as they enable researchers to explore participants' perspectives, meanings, and lived experiences in depth (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2018; Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Semi-structured interviews are particularly appropriate to narrative inquiry, as they transform questions into invitations for storytelling and allow participants to describe their experiences in their own words (Hollway & Jefferson, 1997). Griffee (2005) notes that interviewing can be understood as a form of natural conversation, making it a powerful tool for eliciting personal narratives. Kvale (1996) outlines seven stages of qualitative interviewing: thematising, designing, interviewing, transcribing, analysing, verifying, and reporting, all of which informed the interview process in this study.

An interview guide was used to provide structure and ensure alignment with the research questions, while still allowing flexibility for probing and follow-up questions (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2018; Maxfield & Babbie, 2018). This flexibility was particularly valuable when exploring the complex and sensitive educational and life experiences of incarcerated youth. Participants were encouraged to reflect on their educational journeys, their experiences of preparing for the NSC examination while incarcerated, and their aspirations for the future.

Each interview lasted approximately 45 to 60 minutes. Due to correctional centre regulations and operational demands, interviews were conducted over several days. The conversational nature of the interviews allowed participants to express themselves freely, often revealing insights into their motivations, challenges, and aspirations that might not have emerged through more structured methods (Bhattacharya, 2017).

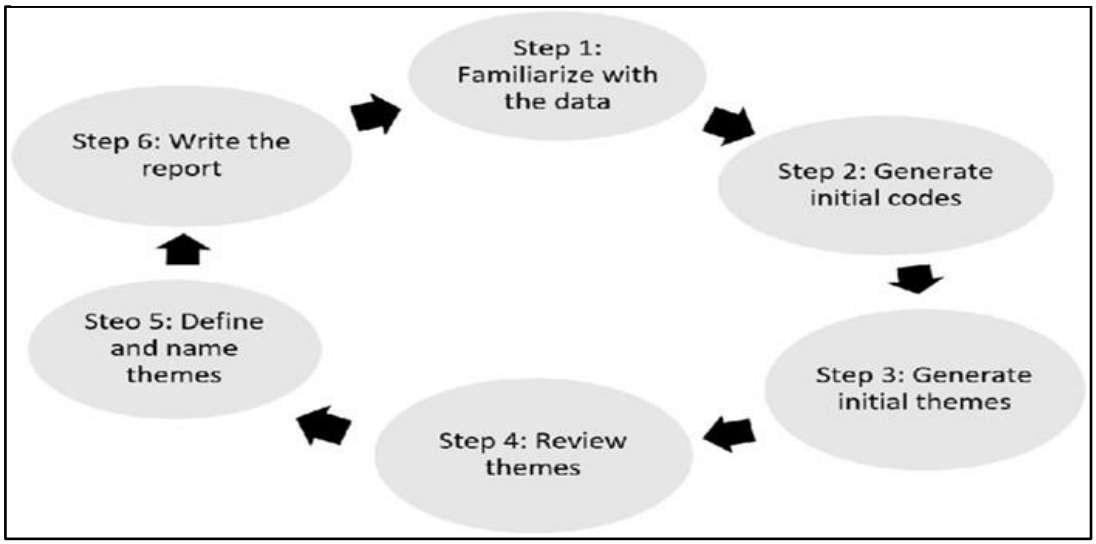
Ethical considerations were central to the data generation process. To protect participants' confidentiality, pseudonyms were used in all transcripts and reporting (Allen & Wiles, 2016). Participants were informed about the purpose of pseudonyms,

and each participant was allowed to choose a name they felt comfortable using. This approach respected participants' agency and cultural preferences, in line with ethical qualitative research practice.

3.6 Data Analysis

Once the data generation process was completed, the interview data were systematically analysed to make sense of the participants' educational experiences (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Qualitative interviews generate large volumes of rich textual data that require a structured, rigorous analytical approach to ensure meaningful interpretation (Corbin & Strauss, 2008; Denzin & Lincoln, 2018). To manage and analyse the data effectively, this study employed thematic analysis, following the six-phase framework proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006), as illustrated in Figure 3.1.

Figure 3.1: Six-step guide to thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006)



Thematic analysis is a flexible yet rigorous qualitative method used to identify, analyse, and report patterns (themes) within data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). It was particularly suitable for this study, as it enabled the researcher to examine recurring patterns in participants' narratives while remaining grounded in their lived experiences as incarcerated youth preparing for the NSC examination.

The six phases of thematic analysis were applied as follows:

- **Phase 1: Familiarisation with the Data**: The first phase involved becoming thoroughly familiar with the data. All interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. The process of transcription formed an initial stage of analysis, as it required close engagement with participants' narratives and allowed the researcher to begin identifying meaningful content (Braun & Clarke, 2006). After transcription, the interview transcripts were read and re-read several times to deepen familiarity with the data. During this phase, preliminary ideas and reflections were noted, focusing on participants' descriptions of their educational experiences, challenges, and support systems within the correctional centre.
- **Phase 2: Generating Initial Codes**: In the second phase, the data were systematically coded. Coding involved identifying and labelling meaningful segments of text that were relevant to the research questions (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Codes were generated inductively from the data rather than being predetermined, ensuring that the analysis remained grounded in participants' own words and experiences. Examples of initial codes included restricted access to learning resources, teacher encouragement, peer support, lockdowns affecting study time, and education as hope for the future. This process enabled the organisation of large volumes of data into manageable and meaningful units (Cohen et al., 2018).
- **Phase 3: Searching for Themes**: Once initial codes were generated, they were examined for patterns of similarity and difference. Related codes were grouped into broader categories, a process that helped reduce and organise the data (Cohen et al., 2018). For example, codes related to *teacher support*, *peer mentoring*, and *family encouragement* were grouped under a broader category of *support systems*. This phase involved moving from descriptive codes to more interpretive patterns that captured key aspects of the participants' educational experiences.
- **Phase 4: Reviewing Themes**: During this phase, the preliminary themes were reviewed and refined to ensure that they accurately represented the data. Each theme was checked against the coded extracts and the entire dataset to confirm coherence and consistency (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Some themes were merged,

while others were revised or discarded if they lacked sufficient supporting data or did not directly address the research questions. This iterative process ensured that the themes were meaningful, distinct, and analytically robust.

- **Phase 5: Defining and Naming Themes**: In the fifth phase, the final themes were clearly defined and named. This involved identifying the core meaning of each theme and determining how it related to the overall research aims. Detailed descriptions were developed for each theme, specifying what aspect of the educational experience it captured and why it was significant. The themes were refined to ensure clarity, depth, and relevance to the study's focus on incarcerated youth preparing for the NSC examination.
- **Phase 6: Producing the Report**: The final phase involved writing up the analysis. The themes were presented and discussed in Chapter 4, supported by rich, illustrative excerpts from participants' narratives. These extracts were used to demonstrate how the themes emerged from the data and to foreground participants' voices. The analysis was linked back to the research questions and the conceptual framework to ensure coherence and analytical depth. Through this process, conclusions were drawn about the educational experiences of incarcerated youth, the factors influencing their learning, and the ways in which they navigated educational opportunities within the correctional environment.

3.7 Trustworthiness of the Study

Trustworthiness is a fundamental principle in qualitative research, ensuring that findings are credible, rigorous, and ethically sound. Unlike quantitative research, which relies on statistical validity and reliability, qualitative research emphasises the authenticity and integrity of the research process and outcomes (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). To establish trustworthiness, this study was guided by the framework proposed by Lincoln and Guba (1985), which comprises four criteria: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability.

In line with this framework, deliberate measures were taken throughout the research process to ensure that the data generated were authentic, accurately represented

participants' experiences, and were not unduly influenced by researcher bias. The researcher remained reflexive and ethically grounded, recognising that qualitative inquiry requires honesty, transparency, and moral integrity (Guba & Lincoln, 1989). The strategies used to ensure trustworthiness in this study are outlined below.

3.7.1 Credibility

Credibility refers to the extent to which the findings accurately reflect the participants' lived experiences and meanings (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). A study is considered credible when readers can recognise the experiences being described and when the researcher's interpretations resonate with participants' perspectives (Tobin & Begley, 2004).

In this study, credibility was enhanced through several strategies. First, in-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted to generate rich, detailed narratives, allowing participants to describe their educational experiences in their own words. Second, prolonged engagement with the data was achieved through repeated reading and re-reading of transcripts during the analysis phase, which deepened the researcher's understanding of participants' accounts.

Third, member checking was employed by clarifying responses during interviews and confirming interpretations where necessary, ensuring that participants' intended meanings were accurately represented. Finally, peer debriefing was utilised through discussions with academic peers and the supervisor, who provided critical feedback on emerging interpretations and themes. These strategies collectively strengthened the credibility of the study by ensuring that the findings were grounded in participants' realities.

3.7.2 Transferability

Transferability refers to the extent to which the findings of a study may be applicable to other contexts or groups (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). In qualitative research, transferability does not imply statistical generalisation; rather, it enables readers to determine whether the findings are relevant to their own contexts (Korstjens & Moser, 2017).

To support transferability, this study provides thick, rich descriptions of the research context, participants, and methodological processes. Detailed accounts of the correctional centre setting, participant demographics, sampling criteria, and data generation methods are presented to allow readers to make informed judgements about the applicability of the findings to similar correctional education contexts (Stahl et al., 2020; Stalmeijer et al., 2024).

By situating the findings clearly within the KwaZulu-Natal correctional environment, the study enables contextual comparison rather than broad generalisation. To further enhance transferability, the study offers detailed, context-rich descriptions of the correctional centre environment, security information, available educational resources, and organisational constraints. Thick description is also provided regarding the participant group, outlining their demographic characteristics, educational histories, and the criteria used for their selection. Furthermore, the data generation process, including the use of biographical narratives, contextual portraits, and thematic analysis, is described in sufficient depth to enable other researchers to assess whether similar approaches could be applied in their own settings. It is therefore hoped that the detail provided enables other researchers to assess transferability to other correctional centre contexts.

3.7.3 Dependability

Dependability concerns the consistency and stability of the research process over time (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). It requires that the research procedures be logical, traceable, and clearly documented so that the study's process can be followed and evaluated (Nowell et al., 2017).

In this study, dependability was ensured through methodological transparency. Detailed descriptions of the research design, sampling strategy, data generation methods, and data analysis procedures are provided. An audit trail was maintained throughout the study, documenting key decisions made during data collection and analysis, including changes to interview prompts, coding decisions, and theme development. This systematic

documentation allows the research process to be scrutinised and enhances the study's methodological consistency and reliability (Korstjens & Moser, 2017).

3.7.4 Confirmability

Confirmability refers to the extent to which findings are shaped by participants' narratives rather than by the researcher's personal biases, assumptions, or preferences (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). It emphasises neutrality and reflexivity in qualitative research.

To enhance confirmability, the researcher engaged in ongoing reflexive practice, critically reflecting on personal positioning, assumptions, and potential influences throughout the research process. An audit trail documented analytical decisions, coding processes, and theme refinement, ensuring that interpretations could be traced back to the raw data. Additionally, peer debriefing served as a mechanism for challenging assumptions and validating interpretations, thereby reducing the influence of researcher bias. Together, these strategies ensured that the findings were grounded in participants' accounts and supported by transparent analytical procedures.

3.8 Ethical Considerations

Ethical considerations are central to the responsible conduct of research, particularly when working with vulnerable populations such as incarcerated youth. This study was conducted in strict accordance with recognised ethical principles to ensure that no physical, emotional, or psychological harm was caused to participants. The research was guided by three core ethical principles: autonomy, beneficence, and non-maleficence (Resnik, 2018). These principles informed all stages of the research process, from participant recruitment and data generation to data storage and reporting.

3.8.1 Autonomy

Autonomy refers to individuals' right to make informed, voluntary decisions about their participation in research, free from coercion or undue influence (Ketefian, 2015). In this study, autonomy was upheld through the informed consent process. All participants were provided with a detailed information sheet outlining the purpose of the study, its aims,

procedures, potential risks and benefits, and their role as participants. This information was communicated clearly before data generation to enable informed decision-making (Arifin, 2018).

Written informed consent was obtained from all participants (Appendix D). To ensure comprehension, consent forms and information sheets were made available in both English and isiZulu, the primary languages spoken by participants. Participation in the study was entirely voluntary, and participants were informed of their right to withdraw at any stage without fear of negative consequences or repercussions within the correctional environment.

Participants' autonomy was further protected through measures ensuring confidentiality and anonymity. Participants selected their own pseudonyms, which were used in all transcripts and reports. No identifying information was included in the dissertation. All data were securely stored in password-protected electronic files, accessible only to the researcher and the academic supervisor, in compliance with institutional ethical standards (Bryman, 2016).

3.8.2 Beneficence Principle

The principle of beneficence requires researchers to maximise potential benefits while minimising possible risks to participants (Barrow et al., 2017). This study was designed to generate both academic and personal benefits. Academically, the research contributes to an improved understanding of the educational experiences of incarcerated youth preparing for the NSC examination. For participants, the research process provided an opportunity for reflection and meaning-making.

Through in-depth semi-structured interviews, participants were encouraged to reflect on their educational journeys, the challenges they encountered, and the significance of education during incarceration. This reflective process enabled many participants to recognise their resilience, reassess their attitudes towards learning, and identify opportunities for personal growth (Mezzerow, 2018). In several instances, narrating their experiences fostered a sense of empowerment and renewed motivation, reinforcing

education as a transformative pathway towards rehabilitation and reintegration (Freire, 1970). In this way, beneficence extended beyond data collection to support participants' personal development.

3.8.3 Non-maleficence

Non-maleficence refers to the obligation to prevent harm and to protect participants from physical, emotional, or psychological distress (Summers, 2020). To uphold this principle, ethical clearance was obtained from the University of KwaZulu-Natal Ethics Committee (Appendix A), followed by formal permission from the DCS (Appendix B) and the Area Commissioner in the Durban region (Appendix C).

Participants were informed that they were not required to answer any questions that made them feel uncomfortable or distressed, and that they could pause or terminate the interview at any time. Given the sensitive nature of discussions related to incarceration, trauma, and personal histories, arrangements were made for access to a counselling psychologist should participants require emotional or psychological support during or after the interviews (Appendix F).

Confidentiality formed a critical component of non-maleficence. All interview data were anonymised, securely stored, and handled with strict confidentiality. No personal identifiers, sensitive institutional information, or details that could compromise the safety of participants or the correctional centre were disclosed in the reporting of findings. These measures ensured that participants were protected from harm and that the integrity of the research process was maintained.

3.9 Limitations of the Study

All research studies are subject to limitations that may influence the scope, process, and interpretation of findings. Limitations refer to constraints that arise during the research process and are largely beyond the researcher's control (Ross & Bibler, 2019). While these limitations do not invalidate the study, acknowledging them provides transparency and allows readers to interpret the findings within their appropriate context.

Several limitations were encountered during this study.

First, time constraints posed a significant challenge. Access to participants was dependent on the operational demands of the correctional centre, including work schedules, examinations, and security routines. On several occasions, the researcher travelled to the site only to be informed that participants were unavailable, resulting in extended waiting periods, sometimes exceeding three hours for a single interview. Additionally, interviews occasionally lasted longer than initially anticipated due to the depth and emotional nature of participants' narratives. These factors disrupted the original data collection timeline, leading to higher logistical and travel costs. To mitigate this limitation, the researcher maintained daily communication with the correctional school principal to confirm participants' availability before site visits.

Second, environmental noise within the correctional facility affected the interview process. Noise from inmates in adjacent sections, including singing and other activities, disrupted the interviews and posed challenges for audio recording quality. In some instances, interviews had to be paused and resumed once the environment became quieter. Despite these efforts, some recordings required careful, repeated transcription checks to ensure accuracy. While this limitation did not compromise the overall integrity of the data, it extended the transcription and verification process.

Third, limited privacy during interviews presented challenges. At times, inmates from other sections observed interviews through windows out of curiosity, which made participants feel exposed and self-conscious, particularly when discussing sensitive personal experiences. To address this concern, the researcher requested access to quieter, more secluded spaces and worked collaboratively with correctional staff and educators to minimise interruptions. Participants were repeatedly reassured about confidentiality and anonymity, which helped establish trust and encouraged open, honest engagement during interviews.

Finally, administrative delays in obtaining research permission constituted a significant

limitation. Securing approval to conduct the study within the correctional centre was a prolonged and complex process, taking over eighteen months to finalise. This delay extended the overall duration of the study and affected the planned research timeline. However, adherence to ethical and institutional protocols was prioritised to ensure the legitimacy and ethical integrity of the research.

Despite these limitations, the strategies employed to mitigate their impact enabled the successful completion of the study. The limitations outlined above are characteristic of research conducted within highly regulated institutional settings and should be considered when interpreting the findings.

3.10 Chapter Summary

This chapter outlined the research methodology and design employed in the study. The research was situated within a critical paradigm, which enabled an in-depth exploration of how incarcerated youth reflected on and interpreted their educational experiences as they prepared for the NSC examination in a correctional centre in the province of KwaZulu-Natal. A qualitative research approach, underpinned by narrative inquiry, was adopted to generate rich and contextually grounded accounts of participants' lived experiences.

Data were generated through in-depth semi-structured interviews, which allowed participants to articulate their educational journeys while affording the researcher the flexibility to probe responses directly to the study's research questions. The interview data were analysed using thematic analysis, following Braun and Clarke's six-phase framework, to identify recurring patterns and themes within participants' narratives. Throughout the research process, careful attention was given to ensuring trustworthiness and adhering to ethical principles, including autonomy, beneficence, and non-maleficence.

Building on this methodological foundation, Chapter 4 presents and analyses the empirical findings of the study, drawing on participants' narratives to illuminate the key themes that emerged regarding the educational experiences of incarcerated youth

registered for the NSC examination.

4. CHAPTER 4: PRESENTATION AND ANALYSIS OF FINDINGS

4.1 Introduction

Chapter 3 outlined the research methodology and analytical approach adopted in this study. Building on that methodological foundation, this chapter presents and analyses the educational experiences of incarcerated youth registered for the NSC examination in a correctional centre in the province of KwaZulu-Natal. The findings presented in this chapter are drawn from individual, in-depth semi-structured interviews and are analysed through the lenses of critical theory and Paulo Freire's Pedagogy of the Oppressed.

The following research questions guided the analysis in this chapter:

Main Research Question

- What are the educational experiences of incarcerated youth registered for the NSC examination in the province of KwaZulu-Natal?

Subsidiary Research Questions

- What factors influence the educational experiences of incarcerated youth in preparation for the NSC examinations?
- How do incarcerated learners navigate the factors that influence their educational experiences?

To address these questions systematically, the chapter is organised into three main sections. The main research question, which seeks to illuminate the educational experiences of incarcerated youth, underpins all sections and themes discussed in this chapter.

The first section (Section 4.2) introduces the theme "**Pathways to incarceration and reflection on consequences**." Although this theme does not directly address a specific research question, it provides essential contextual insight into participants' life histories and the circumstances that shaped their motivation to pursue education while

incarcerated.

Understanding these pathways is critical, as they significantly influence how participants perceive education as a tool for reflection, rehabilitation, and future possibility.

The second section (Section 4.3) addresses both the main research question and the first subsidiary research question by examining the factors that shape participants' educational experiences as they prepare for the NSC examination. Under the theme "**Adapting and thriving through learning in the correctional space**," this section explores the structural, institutional, and interpersonal factors that shape learning in the correctional environment.

The final section (Section 4.5) addresses the second subsidiary research question by examining the strategies and coping mechanisms incarcerated learners use to navigate the constraints and opportunities of correctional education. While this section focuses specifically on navigation and agency, it remains firmly grounded in the main research question, highlighting how learners actively shape their educational experiences despite the limitations of incarceration.

Throughout the chapter, participants are referred to by the pseudonyms they selected: Hopewell, Sanele, Kwanda, Sandile, Charlie, Siyabonga, Ayanda, and Mduduzi. Their narratives foreground the complexity, contradictions, and transformative potential of education within correctional spaces, offering rich insight into how incarcerated youth experience and make meaning of NSC education.

4.2 Pathways to Incarceration and Reflection on Consequences

This first theme examines the causes and pathways that led to incarceration, as well as their consequences. It emphasises the diverse educational backgrounds of participants and the reasons for their criminal activity. Every person's story is a distinct journey filled with choices, obstacles and pivotal moments. This theme provides crucial background for understanding participants' current involvement in education in prison, although it does not directly address the research questions. Two sub-themes are used to present this

theme. The sub-themes tell a story of perceived regret and poor decision-making that led to their incarceration, and then, whilst incarcerated, the role that education played in creating a different person.

4.2.1 Use of Alcohol and Drugs as Pathways to Incarceration

The participants' narratives reveal a deeply rooted entanglement between substance abuse, violence, fractured relationships, and the eventual derailment of their educational journeys. These interconnected challenges not only shaped their pathways to incarceration but continue to influence their prison experiences, identities, and futures. Hopewell, Sanele, Kwanda, Charlie, Siyabonga, Ayanda and Mduduzi's narrative excerpts provide an understanding of this:

> **Hopewell:** "*Growing up in the township, there are a lot of things that are happening. So, once I went to drink with my bigger brother … I was drunk also.* [An altercation broke out with another man, and it turned violent.] *So, he took a bottle, and then he broke it on my face, as you can see here. [Participants showing face scars] he broke it on my face. And then, as I fell down, my brothers ganged on him and… they poked him…, [he]passed away." … Truly speaking, yeah, I do regret. I do have some regrets. Because I feel like maybe I could have avoided the whole situation," and "At the end, I'm still grateful for being here… I have gained a lot of things about life in total.*"

> **Sanele:** "*And when we, in some other day when I pushed money into his account, he said the money didn't reflect, and it caused a conflict between us and that led to me killing him. Yeah, I had regrets, but I found a way to deal with that because in this facility, we have social workers and psychologists to help us deal with those matters.* "

> **Kwanda:** "I *was doing good until my matric. When I got to matric, things got a bit tense because I was exposed to drinking liquor, and you know, when you grow up, you get exposed to drinking alcohol and bunking* [missing classes], *and I ended up failing my matric year*. "

> **Siyabonga:** "*I was under the influence of drugs* [currently incarcerated for robbery]"

> **Ayanda**: "*I would say it is a mixed schooling experience because I was*

> *selling dagga and yes, I love school too and I didn't put more effort on school, I was more focused on girls … I was in Shisanyama with my friend, and did not touch alcohol and my sister came (my sister is an alcoholic and it was between 7 pm and she came with her friends and other guys who were already drunk and.. I tried to talk to my sister that we must now go home, and she say no and one of the guy he was with came and hit me. That is how the fight between us broke out, and he took the knife and tried to stab me, and I tried and managed to take the knife and stab him back. He didn't die that day, and people came and separated us from fighting. He went to the hospital, and the next day, I met him coming from the hospital in the afternoon, around 3 pm. He beat me, revenging for yesterday's altercation, and I went home angry. That day,* [I] *took the knife in the kitchen and I went back to him, and I stab him there, and he died that time. I ran and didn't sleep at home that day. The next day, I heard that he passed on and I went for hiding for two months. …. Yes, I have regret, and what will you do differently? I should have never been aggressive with him. I should have not fight him because he was also way older than me. The environment also played a role, and I felt undermined in front of the whole people in that place.*"

The narratives above provide insight as to why participants were incarcerated. What emerges quite strongly is that the use of alcohol played a significant role in poor decision-making and eventual incarceration. Moreover, violence and substance abuse are seemingly intertwined as the overwhelming causes for their incarceration. From the above excerpts, Hopeful, Sanele, and Ayanda provide insight into the extent to which alcohol lends itself to violence with severe repercussions. Hopewell and Ayanda's account was fuelled by the decision to drink alcohol with their significant others, which resulted in Hopewell's "*knife from the restaurant's table and stabbing him*", resulting in his death. One is also able to see the inclusion of drugs that resulted in Siyabonga committing a robbery.

Further, there is the normalisation of alcohol and drug-fuelled conflict. This is because of early exposure to drugs and alcohol. Kwanele, for example, grew up around alcohol: "*you get to be exposed to some things as a child growing up*", showing that exposure to alcohol at a young age is a normal context or environment. Hopewell's narrative shows how violence and alcohol are cojoined, where his brothers and he "*was drunk*", and when the fight broke out, in their alcoholic state, he and his brothers attacked the perpetrator. This provides understanding of the pairing of violence and alcohol and is a seemingly

‘normal’ and ‘natural’ response to disagreement. The violence perpetrated by him and his brothers also demonstrates a lack of emotional control and constructive conflict resolution.

Another aspect of the intersection of violence and alcohol is that of revenge. Ayanda was not under the influence of alcohol, but his friends and the person involved in the altercation were drunk. In this circumstance, for Ayanda, alcohol cannot be the source of the crime. However, his inability to control his anger was. The pursuit of revenge, motivated by anger, seems to propel both Ayanda and his victim to intensify their confrontation, where the man beats him in ‘*revenge*’. When faced with another beating, Ayanda makes the fatal decision of ‘s*tabbing*’ him, which ultimately results in the death of the man. These instances highlight how socialised responses to violence, a prevailing culture of retaliation, and deficient impulse regulation can worsen conflicts leading to fatal consequences (Gallimore, 2004; Klofas et al., 2019; Lolai et al., 2025).

Further, Ayanda does not find alternative ways, such as the process of dialogue called for by Freire (1970), to resolve the altercation. Instead, revenge caused him to be emotionally unstable and to react in this manner, too. In situations where violence is normalised, there are no positive alternatives to their responses; instead, violence, shame and retaliation become survival strategies. Additionally, according to Gilligan (2003) and Håkansson and Jesionowska (2018), violence frequently stems from unresolved emotional pain and shame, which in the absence of constructive outlets take the form of aggression.

Substance abuse was also a significant factor in participants’ academic disruption, as well as contributing to violence. For Kwanda and Siyabonga, drinking and drugs caused them to fail school, illustrating the prevalence of substance abuse among young people before being arrested. These tales demonstrate dispersed attention, a lack of self-control, a context where alcohol, drugs and the selling of them were normalised and the lack of systems or role models that could support the maintenance of educational focus in tumultuous situations. This led participants to commit crimes that landed them in prison. The findings here are similar to those of Cuomo et al (2008), who found that high levels of impulsiveness and poor self- control jeopardise long-term objectives like finishing

school and leading to incarceration.

Charlie's thoughts also highlight how poverty and the associated financial strains contribute to students' disengagement from school "*I just decided… I was selling drugs and doing all the wrong things… I had to choose between going to school and making money, and I decided to take money.* This is despite him having a high academic aptitude, where "*I was an A student, I did well*". His story illustrates a logical but tragic choice that many young people in underprivileged environments must make. Bronson et al. (2017) note that youth often choose the illegal economy over education to survive financially. Charlie's decision reflects a system that has failed to make education both culturally and materially relevant to the lives of young people from marginalised communities (Freire, 1970). Deep distortions brought about by neoliberal values in unequal societies are revealed through the commodification of worth, in which money takes precedence over long-term educational development (Freire, 1970).

However, high unemployment rates in South Africa constrain legitimate economic opportunities available to young individuals, thereby rendering criminal activities a more appealing alternative. Kingdon and Knight (2007) and Tshabalala (2003) emphasise the role of economic adversity in driving youth toward illegal conduct. Furthermore, Altbeker (2010) and Cramer (2011) observe that the attraction of "*easy money*" and engagement in violent behaviour are indicative of wider societal pressures. This contextual framework elucidates the decision-making processes of the participants, which ultimately culminated in their incarceration.

4.2.2 Lack of Accountability for Behaviour

> **Mduduzi**: "*I've been incarcerated for 8 years. And I have been sentenced for 10 years [he was sentenced for 20 years in prison but got parole and is currently serving for 10 years]. I'm serving time for rape. It was my girlfriend. I slept with her, and in the morning, she wanted money, but I did not have money. Then she went to the police station and opened the case of rape. …. I have many regrets. Yes, I have. Because if maybe I did, maybe I gave my girlfriend the money, maybe I would not be in this situation. Many of them, it's about money that women want from them, and then they get arrested, like in my case.*"

Mduduzi's reflections on his conviction for rape illustrate the complex interplay between violence and distorted perceptions of interpersonal relationships. His narrative frames his relationship with his girlfriend in terms of transactional material exchange, asserting that her decision to initiate legal proceedings was motivated by his failure to provide financial 'compensation' for sleeping with her. Although his statements contain elements of remorse, they are predominantly characterised by denial and a refusal to accept responsibility for his actions. Rather than acknowledging the occurrence of rape, even after his court decision and conviction, he deflects blame. He diminishes the gravity of the offence by suggesting that "*if only I had given her money, I would not be in this situation*." This line of reasoning exemplifies deeply ingrained patriarchal norms that commodify women and legitimise gender-based violence. This would be an act of dehumanisation (Freire, 1970) as his girlfriend is reduced to an object that can be silenced with money.

Further, Mduduzi's ideas reflect oppressor consciousness (Freire, 1970), in which Mduduzi, as a dominant, powerful male, fails to see his girlfriend as a human being. As Beaudrow (2014) details, rape culture is perpetuated through narratives that shift accountability away from perpetrators, and in so doing, prevents them from being ethically accountable. While Walsh (2015) stresses how such discourses normalise male entitlement and undermine women's agency, Fraser (2015) elucidates how both benevolent and hostile sexism intersect to sustain rape culture. In this context, Mduduzi's account fails to promote accountability and instead reinforces patriarchal ideologies that blame women and hinder efforts to address sexual violence. Even though many participants express their sorrow and regret, their thoughts and self-reflection often remain at the personal level. For Mduduzi, this means that changing his behaviour and thoughts may be elusive. Introspection or self-reflection and conscientisation (Freire,1970) thus does not lead to the challenge of dominant patriarchal norms that encourage oppressive gender-based violence.

4.2.3 Family Dynamics and Regret

The participants' voices resonate with reflection, sadness, and desire. Their statements show how early moral confusion, broken homes, and missing parents influenced their

choices and frequently led them into cycles of violence, estrangement, and prison. However, beneath regret lies a strong need for acceptance, connection, and, eventually, change. They convey more than just remorse for the crimes that they have committed; they also convey a sense of being directionless that is made worse by emotional detachment and dysfunctional support networks. Their thoughts provide light on the social and emotional aspects of incarceration that are frequently unsaid, such as the distress of comparison, the loss of affection and stability in their early years, and the regret of wasted time. The following may be understood from the narrative passages by Hopewell, Charlie, Ayanda, and Mduduzi:

> **Ayanda:** "*No, didn't enjoy because of family situation, and I grew up in a very big family with one father and many mother*[s], *and that led my family to be in a form of factions. We are 4 in my father* [house], *and one of my brothers died, and the other two stays with their mothers, and I am the only one who do not have any mother because my mother ran away. The only person who was pushing me to be educated is my grandmother… My father died, and I was a young man who understood what's happening around him, and he died while he was with me. He was shot and die*[d] *in my hands, and he was shot by people we know. I know everyone who shot him. My family insisted that a case must not be opened - they will deal with the matter on their own and deal with those who killed my father. He was shot because of his past apartheid wars. My mom run away after giving birth to me. I have heard stories that she is around- she didn't want to get to know me, and I have come to accept that, too. And since I was incarcerated, she has never come to see me.*"

> **Mduduzi:** "*I need to be supported by my family. Yeah, I need to be supported. Maybe, if it can happen, they come here. Because my family, I grew up with my family, we grew up with prayer. There are people who are loving God, and then I need them to come and give me prayers.*"

> **Hopewell:** "*I went home to report him, and then my mother said, we must not fight. Let's forgive him … I get support from home. They always come to visit me. Even this month, they will come to visit me. My brother and my sister always come, even in December. They get what I want…I remember I enjoyed schooling because I was looking forward to my future. Then I could do something so that my family and my parents would be happy about it. Then things didn't go as I planned. Even my younger brother, now he's working, wearing nice things, everything is nice for him. Even my friends that I grew up with live a good life now*".

> **Charlie**: "*I'm sorry. I was young, I was 18, I wasn't thinking, and it ended up biting me because…I look at four years wasted plus another five years, it's a lot of time that's been taken away from me … I would probably be an engineer right now. I would probably have a couple of businesses*".

Self-reflection emerges as a critical process for young offenders, aligning with Paulo Freire's concept of conscientisation, where individuals critically perceive and transform their reality through awareness of social and personal harms. Charlie's remorseful statement, "*I'm sorry, I was young, I was 18, I wasn't thinking... it's a lot of time that's taken away from me*", reveals initial conscientisation, as he recognises the pain inflicted on his family and the broader consequences of his actions, marking a shift from unreflective behaviour to accountability. This realisation extends to envisioning alternate paths, such as "*I'd probably be an engineer' or would own a couple of businesses,*" which highlights Freire's (1970), "*reading the world*" idea, interpreting one's life context through regret to challenge oppressive cycles and reclaim agency.

Warr (2016) explains that offenders often reflect on how their lives were derailed and how they missed essential milestones, such as education and careers. Their guilt turns from simple guilt into a motivation for change. In this process, participants like Charlie become more aware of their prison status by comparing where they might have been to where they are. Freire's (1970) ideas present this as a form of empowerment: self-reflection helps Charlie, in particular, see the damage he has done and inspires him to take real steps toward change, rather than running away from reality.

In addition, Ayanda presents an alternative story detailing the emotional toll of growing up in a broken household where he had one father but "*many mothers*". His story illustrates how divided and polygamous families can sabotage emotional unity and cause instability in situations where harmony is required. In addition, the lack of love and support was compounded by his mother not wanting him to become even more vulnerable. His target status based on his age made him vulnerable to the pain of not knowing love (Freire,1970). The only support structure for him was his grandmother, who provided him with education. Ayanda's tale is one of pain, marked by the loss of family connection

and support. Having his father die in his "*hands*" continues to plague him even today.

This continued historical trauma could be attributed to political violence, and his father was shot while in his car with him because of violence stemming from the apartheid wars. This trauma extends to include abandonment by his mother, who fled after giving birth and never contacted him, even though she lived in the same area. He "*reads the world*" (Freire, 1970) in which he grew up, and it was a world that forced the hurtful realisation that he lacked value. The painful realisation is echoed in this statement: "*I have come to accept that too after learning that she is still alive but uninterested to see me*". His acceptance indicates the emotional distance that is frequently fostered in environments where care and love are either withdrawn or unreliable, and it concurs with similar findings by Jekins et al. (2015), Brimm (2010), and Frost et al. (2022).

One fact emerges from all these reflections: the participants regret not only their crimes but also their separation from their families' stable mentors and their own futures. Their stories depict a life of moral doubt, emotional suffering and severed familial ties. However, by discussing their stories and through self-reflection, participants acknowledge the source of their suffering and see it as a motivator for their future. For Freire (1970), this is an awakening of critical consciousness, and even though it hurts, this awakening is essential.

This can be understood as a structural problem where intergenerational patterns of poverty, neglect and absent caregiving frequently affect marginalised families, resulting in emotional detachment that impairs learning and decision-making. (Manasia & Parvan, 2025). One can potentially conclude that this is the reason for Siyabonga's eventual incarceration. Mduduzi's appeal, "*I need my family to support me…. I need people who love God to come and pray for me*," resonates with Paulo Freire's concept of humanisation, an aspiration to become more fully human through relationships, reflection, and transformative action within one's world. His story shows the importance of emotional, spiritual, and practical support, revealing a deep need for affirmation and dignity through a process of becoming more fully human, as described by Freire (1970) Despite his imprisonment, he maintained strong family ties and his story shows how

strong family ties can be a protective factor and a source of hope for individuals before and after imprisonment. These findings are consistent with the existing literature, which emphasises the crucial role of family and social support in fostering the resilience of the prison population (Sari et al., 2022), stressing that these support relationships foster the pursuit of a fuller humanity, as Freire describes.

Additionally, the literature supports this finding, highlighting the importance of family involvement during imprisonment and its role in promoting emotional stability and facilitating adjustment (Maharani & Muhammad, 2025). However, comparing himself to his brother, who is "*working and wearing nice clothes*," and to his friends, who are "*living a good life*," is a source of both pain and motivation for Mduduzi. Seeing others thrive while he is imprisoned causes him pain, which relates to what Hughes et al. (2014) refer to as the emotional fallout of lost progression. Self-comparison of this nature worsens regret and the desire to restore dignity through self-improvement. However, it is also a source of motivation, as he hopes one day to have a future with his family and be "*happy*".

4.3 Adapting and Thriving Through Learning in Prison

This theme examines the educational experience of incarcerated youth as they prepare for the NSC examination. It compiles participants' stories to show that participation in formal education goes beyond meeting curricular requirements. Instead, the process of NSC preparation is intertwined with the larger reality of imprisonment, where education is a collaboration of identity, discipline, hope, and future goals. This theme and its sub-themes highlight how preparation for the NSC test shapes participants' learning paths by examining their learning experiences in a correctional environment. Through these accounts, education emerges as a meaningful practice that supports personal development alongside academic achievement.

4.3.1 Rehabilitative Effects of Studying for the NSC Programme

Through participation in the structured NSC educational programmes, incarcerated youth in this study acquired not only academic knowledge but also essential cognitive

competencies, including problem-solving, decision-making, and critical thinking (Burstein et al., 2017). These skills are crucial to their ability to resist criminal influences after their release. Consequently, education functions as a rehabilitation mechanism by offering alternatives to criminal trajectories and promoting a sense of purpose and social responsibility (de Carvalho, 2015).

> **Siyabonga:** "*Because I'm a maximum…if I am in the section, I might end up doing very wrong things. I would put it that way…I will say I don't really feel as if I'm in jail, school distract me from the reality of my situation.*"

> **Sanele**: "*Because my educational experience outside is the one that made me, when I was here, to revisit my goal and revisit my NSC certificates, that's how bad it was outside. And now I have a chance to change it. Then I decided to go back to school and change… It's the mistakes that I made that led me here, firstly. And secondly, it's my dreams, wanting to achieve my dreams. That's what inspired me to be here, motivated me to be here. I'm not going to lie. I wasn't this committed to my education. I just went to school for the sake of going to school. But now I'm going to school with a purpose, what I want to achieve through education. So, it's now not the same.*"

When asked about access to psychological services, Sanele further indicated:

> "*You have to make an appointment, raise a hand, tell a warder that you wish to see a psychologist. If it's a psychologist or social worker, then they will make an appointment for you. You receive a slip that will have a date and a time when you will be attending the psychologist.*"

> **Sandile**: "*Education plays an important role because us, because we are in here incarcerated, even our minds, it makes us think outside the box. Okay. To see our potential, to see if we do things right. You end up, not all of us, but 99% of us end up learning and then having business while they are here because of education. And the other thing that I can say is many of us, we are very talented. I've experienced that education is the key to success. You see, in order to have education, they can take everything from you, but no one can take your matric, no one can take your education.*"

> **Siyabonga:** "*If you're not going to school, …. you'll be like, sitting around your neighbourhood and sitting there, doing all the wrong things with your friends, like, robbing people. Doing all the wrong things, like taking drugs. Now, during the weekdays, you know, I have to go to school, I have to do*

this! I have to do this! Everything that I want to do now I can be able to do it, education has been it possible for me."

"*.... Because I am able to reason with other people, so I think even* [NSC] *education played its part in this of change. Because when I came here, I wasn't the person that I am today, because I am able to think differently.*"

C**harlie**. "*Education is something nobody can take away from you. And I think the schooling helps a lot of prisoners here in jail. Especially when they come out, they have opportunities. They can still learn something of themselves. It opens a lot of doors for them. That's what education does. I think that these programs affect young offenders in a positive way. I want to stay away from crime; that's the main thing. .... teaches you respect, discipline, tolerance... You still feel human when you're in school because you're not treated as a prisoner.*"

Kwanda: "*You are given a second chance to become a person, a second chance to change your life… When you're here studying in this programme, people see you, people know that you're doing good things in jail, you are now being educated. They see you with a different view now, or other side of you, that you were not when you first came here. So, they have that thing that maybe you've*
changed, and then they give you a second chance…. I saw other inmates. ...achieving their Senior Certificates while in here. And I saw it as an opportunity. Since I failed my matric while I was outside, maybe this might be a second chance."

Mduduzi: "*.... I heard that inside is very rare to get a job from the government if you have a criminal record.*"

From the narrative excerpts above, their decision to participate in the NSC programme has led to a life-changing realisation. They see their participation in the programmes in various ways. Firstly, participating in the programme and being in the correctional centre has saved them from a life of crime. Both Siyabonga and Sanele refer to the township where the potential for recidivism is glaring, as they might end up "*doing wrong things*", like "*robbing people*" or taking drugs. Instead, prison has a productive force because it has forced them to reevaluate their life choices and to see the benefits of becoming educated through the NSC programme. This is supported by Behan (2024), who argued that the NSC examination can be effective in encouraging offenders to engage in critical reflection and subsequently, to move away from criminal activity.

Secondly, the education they encounter is also a source of self-reflection and conscientisation. For Siyabonga, participating in the NSC programme has created a profound shift in his self-perception and life trajectory. He shared that "*everything that I want to do now I can do it*". This transformative potential is evident in personal relationships where he "*is now able to reason with other people... I wasn't the person that I am today because I am able to think differently*". The self-reflection and transformation are also conveyed by Charlie, where education allows his 'dreams' to unfold and, more importantly, where he and others can learn who "*can still learn something of themselves*".

Their narratives reflect the Freirean (1970) notion of 'conscientisation or awareness', the awakening of critical consciousness where the learner begins to understand their social condition of crime and 'wrongdoings' outside of prison and develops the tools to change their situation. By engaging in learning, incarcerated youth here are not only gaining knowledge but reclaiming agency over their lives, challenging the structural limitations that led to their incarceration, for example, being able to make "*better decisions*". Rubin (2013) posits that through the process of learning, incarcerated youth not only gain knowledge but also regain a sense of agency in their lives, thereby actively contesting the structural constraints that contributed to their imprisonment.

Thirdly, there is the realisation that they have a "*second chance*" to challenge their poor choices and to change their lives. Both Kwanda and Sanele talk about second chances. Second chances here serve two purposes: they are second chances because they did not take advantage of opportunities when they were in school before incarceration. For Sanele, he just went to school "*for the sake of going to school*". Further, the second chance represents an opportunity to make a change and push for your goals, to think differently "*outside the box*", to see their "*potential*". The third idea about second chances is that they change people's perspectives of you. Now the label of criminal can be reimagined as something else. These reflections highlight how the correctional learning space offers a path back to purpose and is instrumental in interrupting cycles of disempowerment and missed opportunity (Spelman, 2020).

Charlie similarly spoke about the rehabilitative impact of prison education, showing how second-chance opportunities and education enable him even to resist "*Bad influences among prisoners … but success depends on your own decisions… you have to stay strong*." Freire describes a culture of silence in which the oppressed internalise the views of the oppressor and feel voiceless. Charlie's testimony shows that he has broken the silence by refusing to go along with the bad influences. By naming the violence, the "*bad influences*", and the "*dignity*" that he has gained through his education, he is asserting his voice and reclaiming his identity beyond the label of prisoner. Moreover, Charlie's decision to use education as a "*second chance*" and to resist negative influences is a praxis of the movement, in which he reflects on his environment and actively chooses ways to change his life path outside of prison. Charlie's recognition of the prison environment and his own status in it, and his insistence that success depends on his own choices, reflect this critical awareness of prison culture rather than a passive acceptance of it.

This statement reflects the individual responsibility and resilience that learning cultivates in an environment often dominated by violence and negativity. He also noted that "*when you are in school, you still feel human because you are not treated like a prisoner*", and he pointed out how education restores a sense of dignity and identity that is threatened by imprisonment, and where the labels and chains of prison are questioned and broken. (Fantuzzo, 2022) Praxis for Freire is a reflection-in-action aimed at changing oppressive conditions. School becomes a place of praxis, where Charlie not only "*feels human again*" but also uses this regained dignity to resist the internalisation of the label "prisoner" and to focus on a different life path outside prison. Sanele and Kwanele now see learning as an opportunity. This transition from passive attendance to purposeful learning emphasises how education in prison can foster not only academic growth but also moral and personal development, empowering learners to reflect, aspire, and act differently (Conway, 2024; Dorsey, 2024).

Paulo Freire conceptualises learning as a humanising process that enables individuals to regain agency and effect transformative changes in their lives, particularly within oppressive environments (Freire, 1970). Similarly, critical theory highlights education

as an emancipatory mechanism that empowers learners to confront structural limitations and strive toward self-actualisation (Giroux, 2011). From this perspective, learning transcends mere knowledge acquisition, serving as a vehicle for fostering self-discipline and intrinsic motivation. Consequently, education operates simultaneously as a catalyst for personal development and a form of resistance against systems of domination.

Kwanda's experience further supports this view. He noted that "*you are given a second chance change your life*," while also observing that education changes public perception, where people see the change you have undergone and then "*they give you a second chance*." Sandile expanded on this, emphasising the value of critical thinking and creativity gained through prison education. He said, "*Education makes us think outside the box…see our potential.*" For him, education is something "*no one can take away*". These reflections reveal how incarcerated learners reframe their incarceration not solely as punishment but as a second chance**,** in which education can lead to economic empowerment and personal dignity (Prasov & Abakumova, 2020). Charlie affirmed the social benefits of correctional education as "*it opens a lot of doors*" as well as "*teaches respect, discipline, tolerance.*" These statements show that education contributes to positive identity formation, reinforcing values needed for reintegration into communities (Bazemore & Stinchcomb, 2004; Whitehouse & Fitzgerald, 2020).

Mduduzi's perspective introduces another layer of reflection linking education with the harsh realities of post-prison life. He said, "*My career choices changed because when I got arrested…, is very rare to get a job… if you have a criminal record.*" In this sense, education serves not just rehabilitative but strategic functions, offering a form of social capital needed to overcome the stigmas and barriers that follow incarceration (Hattery & Smith, 2010; Curtis et al., 2021). These testimonies reflect that education within correctional centres is deeply rehabilitative, not because it simply reforms behaviour, but because it restores humanity, creates hope, and builds pathways out of structural marginalisation (Freire, 2017; Seymour & Levin, 2015; Olugbenga, 2022). Through learning, incarcerated youth come to see themselves differently, resist institutionalisation, and imagine new futures (Christianakis & Mora, 2018). Education, therefore, is not only about acquiring certificates; it is about reclaiming life, voice, and

purpose in a system that often seeks to silence all threats (Gibson, 2006; Calderón-Almendros & Echeita-Sarrionandia, 2022).

Critical Theory and the educational philosophy of Paulo Freire conceptualise education as a rehabilitative instrument that facilitates learners' critical examination of their social conditions and promotes the transformation of oppressive structures (Freire, 1970; Giroux, 1983). For incarcerated youth, education serves to reclaim personal agency, contest systemic inequalities, and acquire competencies essential for successful societal reintegration (Freire, 1970). Consequently, education transcends mere transmission of knowledge, functioning instead as a dynamic process of both individual and collective emancipation (Giroux, 1983). This process cultivates empowerment, enhances self-awareness, and develops the capacity to make informed, meaningful decisions after incarceration (Freire, 1970).

4.3.2 Learning as a Tool for Personal Growth and Motivation

The process of personal transformation among incarcerated youth originates with a change of self-identity. Many offenders enter correctional centres bearing fragmented identities, which experiences of poverty, social marginalisation, and stigmatisation have shaped. The offered programme, whether non-formal or formal, such as the NSC examination programme, serves as a crucial mechanism for rebuilding self-esteem and cultivating a sense of agency. From a theoretical standpoint, Paulo Freire's Pedagogy of the Oppressed (Freire, 1970) offers an understanding of the transformative power of education and the capacity it enables, allowing incarcerated youth to engage in critical reflection on their lived experiences and to think about alternative futures. In the context of education in correctional settings, transformation occurs when hope, resilience, and revitalised confidence in the incarcerated learner's ability emerge, leading to meaningful contributions to society. The attainment of the NSC by the incarcerated enhances their self-worth and elevates their dreams and aspirations toward further education and, importantly, education and employment opportunities.

> **Sanele***:* "*It's been challenging, but yet a lesson that I found important for me to learn, because this preparation for exams helps me, what can I say, helps*

me to know how to adjust and adapt to the obstacles that I face, and to be to stay on my feet no matter what's happening, what can I say, and dedicate my time and my time to education."

Sandile: "*It does, because it helps you, because now you can know what are the things, because I'm learning life orientation, because now I know everything about life orientation, how to approach people, so that I can even maybe come to the schools, try to motivate the learners about how's life is…*"

"*For me to be here is difficult, but now I can think of something else. I can identify my strengths and weaknesses…. In life, the shortest way in life is to go slow. I don't have to be fast. Shortcuts won't lead me anywhere. That is what I learned because now I'm inside...For me to be here is difficult, but now I can think of something else. I can identify my strengths and weaknesses.*"

Charlie: "*Everything the way it's going right now must continue going the way it is. And I'll succeed. We have the perfect recipe here in our school for success. It's only up to you; you have to want it, that's the main thing. You have to do it. But it's everything… Education allows you to build yourself and gain more knowledge. Okay. It also allows you to dream, allows you to push for your goals. Education is something nobody can take away from you… I want to stay away from crime; that's the main thing. I don't want to come back inside of the school.*"

Kwanda: "*Being educated while in here gives you the opportunity to think that you are still, you can still be a better person outside, when you go outside… You can still be someone and be recognised by society*."

Siyabonga: "*The only thing that bothers me is that I'm too lazy. Even yesterday, the teachers were complaining about me. They said I was starting to drop. It's not like the first time and the second time. The results are now dropping. I don't think I'm doing well because I can also see that my results are dropping. But I know that I can do better because now we're about to finish the year. We're about to take our final exam next week, if I'm not mistaken. So, I have to focus on studying. That before then I wasn't, I wasn't the type of person who was able to reason with other people, but now I'm able to reason with other people, and I'm able to see what I'm doing is wrong, what I'm doing is right. Everything that I want to do now I can do it; Education has been it possible for me.*"

Sanele offers a personal reflection, describing his educational journey as challenging yet meaningful, teaching him "*to learn*" and "*adjust and adapt to the challenges*". His words

reveal a growing resilience and an emerging ability to navigate adversity, essential life skills nurtured through consistent academic effort. Education here functions as a mirror through which incarcerated youth begin to reflect on their choices and strategies for different life plans. Charlie gives his similar personal reflection about the role of agency and individual accountability in learning by stating, "*We have the perfect recipe here in our school for success. It's only up to you; you have to want it… you have to do it*". The view that incarcerated learners are not passive recipients of knowledge but are considered active agents in their own development is what Freire (1970) would regard as transformative education. For Charlie, motivation is internal; it is about seizing the moment, pushing forward, and not waiting for rehabilitation to be given but rather creating it through participation. Kwanda spoke to the future-facing nature of education, noting that through education, he can become someone "*recognised by the society*".

This idea alone makes it clear that education restores hope, moreover, suggesting that identity and social worth are not permanently damaged by incarceration (Quan-Baffour & Zawada, 2012). Instead, through participation in educational programmes, the study's incarcerated young people regain a sense of belonging and start to see themselves as worthy of respect in their communities, demonstrating that social reintegration can begin behind prison walls (Little & Warr, 2022). However, the journey is not without struggle. Siyabonga noted that he is aware of his academic decline, which he attributes to his laziness, and that "*the teachers were complaining about me*". However, this honesty is also paired with self- motivation and accountability: "*I know that I can do better because now we are about to finish the year… So, I have to focus on studying…*"

This self-reflection offers insight into their critical turning point, when education is no longer just about passing examinations but about confronting personal limitations and striving to improve their lives. This, therefore, is a process of reclaiming self-discipline in an environment where control is often external. From a theory perspective, critical theory provides us with an argument that education within correctional walls must not be a one way or narrowly construed or as mere preparation for examinations, instead, it must be recognised as a dynamic ground of power relations, resistance, and transformative potential (Bumiller, 2013; O'Connor, 2021; Mayo, 1999; Filippini, 2016). Incarcerated

youth who perceive learning as a means of reclaiming self-discipline actively resist the correctional system's mechanisms of external control and dehumanisation (Williams, 2019).

These participants exercise agency by using education as a tool to fight oppression, rebuild their identities, and imagine possibilities beyond correctional walls or reintegration into society, rather than submitting to laws and punitive measures. As a result, education in correctional spaces functions as a vehicle for empowerment, countering structural inequalities and the disciplinary regime inherent in prison environments. (Rosenman, 1980; Mahanta, 2024). For some, Education has reshaped their worldview and moral compass. Sandile reflected: "*Because now I am learning life orientation… I can motivate the learners about how life is*" [after reintegration, he wants to go out to schools and motivate other learners**]**. This is not simply learning for oneself; it is transformative learning that prepares one to give back to others. He further added, "*I can know what my strengths and my weaknesses* [are]", indicating growing self-knowledge and emotional intelligence, both critical for breaking the cycles of recidivism and marginalisation.

Siyabonga, who admitted having academic challenges, recognised the personal transformation through learning: "*Now I'm able to reason with other people… I'm able to see what I'm doing is wrong, what I'm doing is right.*" Education is empowering him with a moral plan, which will therefore enable him to make informed decisions and differentiate between destructive and constructive behaviours, key shifts aligned with social rehabilitation (Farid-Arbab, 2012). This understanding gives an idea that for many incarcerated learners, education represents ownership over their future, a future that is no longer determined solely by their past mistakes. Sandile reinforced this lesson in patience and self-discovery, stating, "*In life, the shortest way in life is to go slow… Shortcuts won't lead me anywhere... That is what I learned because now I'm inside.*" This statement exemplifies a deeper level of learning, philosophical and reflective, inspired by lived experience and made meaningful through Education. These demonstrate that for incarcerated youth, learning is not a means to pass time or gain literacy, but a vehicle for self-improvement, critical reflection, and long- term motivation (Szifris, 2018). Charlie

concluded with clarity and resolve, "*I want to stay away from crime; that is the main thing. I do not want to come back inside this prison.*" Education, therefore, becomes a moral compass, a spark of hope, and a concrete step toward freedom, not just from prison, but from cycles of harm, violence, and marginalisation (Kasler, 2014).

From critical pedagogy (Freire, 1970), learning is a humanising process that helps individuals regain agency and transform their lives, particularly in oppressive environments such as correctional spaces. Critical theory views education as an emancipatory practice that enables students to confront structural issues, progress toward self-awareness, and become themselves (Giroux, 2011). According to this viewpoint, learning serves to promote self- discipline and intrinsic motivation rather than merely acquiring knowledge. Consequently, Education operates simultaneously as a catalyst for personal development and a form of resistance against systems of domination.

4.4 Factors that Influence the Educational Experiences of Incarcerated Youth

As stated previously, the main research issue underpins all the sub-questions. The main issue raised concerns institutional-level constraints stemming from the correctional centre's structures, policies, and day-to-day operations. The existing literature (Barreiro-Gen & Novo-Corti, 2015; Henderson, 2024; Tanaka & Cooper, 2020) shows that students' learning experience in prison is shaped by limited access to technology, the lack of textbooks, curriculum restrictions, and insufficient study materials. Moreover, security protocols and frequent interruptions have made it difficult for participants to prepare effectively for NSC examinations. Together, these factors shaped how incarcerated youth experienced and navigated the preparation for the NSC examinations.

4.4.1 Limited Subject Offering

In South Africa, incarcerated youth face significant limitations in accessing a curriculum that aligns with their goals and aspirations while pursuing education behind bars (Mdakane et al., 2022). Within the correctional spaces under study, participants indicated that only two academic streams, namely commerce and general education, are offered. In this context, incarcerated youth have suggested that subjects in science, agriculture,

technology, or vocational trades are notably absent from their curriculum. Therefore, this limited subject offering prevented participants from pursuing their individual interests or building skill sets that align with the demands of the labour market or their long-term aspirations (Miles et al., 2013). The curriculum, instead of facilitating transformation and rehabilitation, reproduces exclusion and hinders holistic development. The participants below, Hopewell, Kwanda, Sanele, and Ayanda, provide a sense of how this subject limitation restricts them from fully doing what they desire.

> **Hopewell**: "*Outside, I was doing commerce, so it's something that I knew. So yeah, when I came here, I asked how many streams they got, and they said they have commerce and general. So, I decided to go with what I already know. I took commerce as my stream, so I'm a commerce student. So, I chose commerce because I was familiar with it… But sometimes you end up choosing something you don't really like.*"

> **Sanele: "***I wish they could implement more skills development programs in this facility, so we can uplift our skills to prepare us for the world outside. So maybe, if you can, expand more on that, because I feel like it's very important. I'm talking about skills like welding, plumbing, carpentry, all those things that will allow us to stand on our own outside. Because the system, what I've heard about people who've been arrested before, it's very hard for a person like me to come here to get a job outside. That's why I'm saying we wish that they can implement something that will help us. So that when we go outside, we'll be able to not go and kind of save days looking for jobs. We can create our own job opportunities through skills… Some other fields, like agriculture and science, we also appreciate it.*"

> **Ayanda:** "*Some of us, when we were incarcerated, we were doing physical sciences, Agriculture, technical math, religion and all languages offered outside, and the subjects offered here are different, and if they can add it, maybe most people will take part because of the restrictions involved*. "

> **Kwanda:** "*There are only two streams, so if you don't choose this one, you get the other one. So, I chose the commerce stream*."

Participants acknowledge that they do have access to educational opportunities within the correctional centre. However, some expressed concern about what they were offered, 'commerce and general', which they believed was limited and restrictive. This limitation reveals how the curriculum in a correctional education centre may reflect institutional

control rather than learner-centred goals. According to Freire (1970), denying learners the opportunity to co-determine their educational path constitutes a form of epistemic violence that silences alternative knowledge and voices. In the current setup, learners are forced to limit themselves to a few subjects rather than pursue meaningful academic or vocational goals. This creates, as Fraser (2009) describes, a "*misrecognition*" of their identities, aspirations, and lived experiences. Hopewell, for example, explained that he was already familiar with commerce before incarceration: "*outside I was doing commerce.*"

However, when faced with little option, he "*decided to go with what I already know.*" Therefore, his decision was based on a lack of choice rather than a preference, and this accounts for his later reflection that he ended up "*choosing something you do not like*." Hopewell's experience demonstrates how false choices become normalised in prison education. Although technically given an option, he was confined to a limited pool of subjects. Wright et al. (2019) argue that this lack of diversity in correctional curricula contributes to demotivation and a diminished sense of purpose among incarcerated students. Instead of being empowered to learn what is meaningful, learners are reduced to passive consumers of available content, precisely the banking model of education that Freire (1970) critiques.

Sanele and Ayanda point to the other subject choices they are familiar with. For example, before incarceration, Ayanda had engaged with "*subjects like physical sciences, agriculture, religious studies, and all the languages.*" However, both he and Sanele point to the lack of access to these subjects within the centre's confines. For these two participants, engaging with subjects such as 'welding, plumbing, and carpentry' would be beneficial, as it would give them more choices. This limited offering not only affects personal growth but also significantly undermines post-release reintegration, as those who have been "*arrested before*" find it difficult to "*get a job outside*."

According to Miles et al. (2013), prison education should be designed to align with labour market demands, equipping inmates with industry-relevant skills that foster employability and social reintegration. It is for this reason that Sanele rightfully

recognises that what he is exposed to will not allow him to integrate into society when he is released. This appeal reflects a broader desire for education as a means of empowerment, aiming to break free from cycles of marginalisation and dependency. In critical theory, this aligns with the principle of praxis**,** which involves reflection combined with action to transform oppressive realities (Freire, 1970). By requesting practical, hands-on skills, Sanele and others are not just critiquing the current system but proposing alternatives rooted in dignity and self- sufficiency.

This insistence on vocational relevance and practical education is echoed in literature by Muthaphuli (2020), who found that the absence of vocational programming in correctional centres significantly hampers ex-offenders' ability to gain employment post-release, exposing them to poverty, recidivism, and further marginalisation. Failing to be responsive to the needs of incarcerated youth would mean that skills and knowledge would not make them competitive in the outside world. This misalignment contributes to what Apple (2004) calls "*curricular stratification***,**" where marginalised populations are systematically offered limited or diluted forms of education, further embedding social hierarchies.

While education holds transformative power for incarcerated youth, its full potential is often obstructed by the structural and environmental realities of correctional life (Mkosi & Mahlangu, 2015). Participants' accounts reveal that despite their commitment to learning, institutional conditions create persistent barriers that disrupt concentration, motivation, and access to learning spaces and materials. Here are the narratives:

> **Sanele**: "*I don't want to lie, it's been two weeks, the room that we're staying in does not have lights. It's hard to study. We ended up going to the toilets, because the light is in the toilet, to study in the toilet, because in the room there's no light… Because this is jail, they normally search at any time. They searched and took out the clothes, and when they were taking out the clothes, one of the globes broke, and it ended up not lighting again, since then*."

> **Mduduzi**: "*The environment is good for teaching and learning, but not well enough. Because the school is starting to be getting old, it needs to be renovated. In summer, things are not well, but yeah, it's still good for now*

…. A problem that I faced in here, if you are studying, there is too much work. And then there is too many people in the room, because we are staying maybe 46 people inside the room. And then they are making noise, making noise, and some are studying, some are not studying. You see, this can make it hard to study. Or maybe there is a huge trouble in their home. And when I hear something that someone has passed on, that can make me not to focus more on studying."

Charlie: "*I don't know if it's out of spite or jealousy. Your books will just go missing or damaged.*"

Kwanda: "*We all know that jail, sometimes you get searched. Sometimes there are stabbings in jail. So, you end up not being able to come to school that day because there has been a stabbing. You get searched, your books get tagged, and your books get wet. Yeah. Maybe those are some of the challenges.*"

Ayanda: "*The other challenge is electricity. It has been two weeks now since we last had electricity in our cells. During the raid, our globes were destroyed*."

4.4.2 Disruptions to Learning Opportunities

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Mduduzi: "*The environment is good for teaching and learning, but not well enough. Because the school is starting to be getting old, it needs to be renovated. In summer, things are not well, but yeah, it's still good for now …. A problem that I faced in here is that if you are studying, there is too much work. And then there is too many people in the room, because we are staying maybe 46 people inside the room. And then they are making noise,*

making noise, and some are studying, some are not studying. You see, this can make it hard to study. Or maybe there is a huge trouble in their home. And when I hear something that someone has passed on, that can make me not to focus more on studying."

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Several factors inhibit these participants' access to and participation in learning. Firstly, the raids by correctional centre guards are not only about ensuring safety for all incarcerated people but also have long-lasting consequences. For example, both Ayanda and Sandile point to the lack of necessities like electricity after guards "*searched*" and "*raided*" their rooms, and in the process, 'globes broke'. The situation has become dire as "*two weeks have passed since we last had electricity in our cells.*" One could argue that education is undervalued among workers at the correctional facility. Despite these barriers, incarcerated youth were determined to study, moving instead to the "*toilets*" to study. This image of learners forced to study under a toilet light reflects not only a lack of basic infrastructure but a neglect of the learning environment**,** undermining the very goal of rehabilitation through education. Paulo Freire (1970) argued that oppressive structures limit the ability of the marginalised to participate fully in the education they receive, and here the lack of adequate lighting symbolises the prison's disregard for learners' dignity and educational needs. These frequent searches and raids**,** though framed as necessary for security, often result in collateral damage to educational resources and infrastructure. As such, what is meant to enforce discipline ironically ends up disrupting educational discipline and routine.

Secondly, Mduduzi offered additional insight into the deteriorating conditions of the school itself, stating that the "*school is old and in need of renovation*." His measured tone conveys both a desire to appreciate what exists and a plea for urgent infrastructural renewal. The "*old school*" metaphorically and physically represents an outdated approach to correctional education, one that fails to align with contemporary standards of dignity, safety, and human rights. More concerning is the erosion of learning materials and personal study resources, often at the hands of other offenders. Sentiments that the environment is still good for teaching and learning also indicate people who should be grateful for what they have access to, even though they and their fellow participants have become accustomed to accepting less, which has shaped their identity as "*less*" as well. They are thus rendered powerless.

Thirdly, Charlie noted the lack of support from their fellow incarcerated peers, where they destroy their books and where "*Your books will just go missing or damaged*" This highlights a critical sociological conflict between learners and non-learners in a shared space. The theft and destruction of books reflect a broader institutional failure to cultivate an environment that respects and protects learning. Freire (1970) warned that without collective conscientisation, the critical awakening of both the oppressed and the oppressor, oppression may be internalised and redirected, as seen in this peer-to-peer sabotage.

Kwanda says that in some other times where there was an act of violence in their cells, they: "*you end up not being able to come to school that day because there has been a stabbing.*" This gives a bigger picture of the hidden challenges to learning opportunities in correctional facilities. This also raises the question whether the dreams of incarcerated youth are well catered for, mainly because of how the prison environment, in its nature, is a secure and highly guided space. He further alludes that you get to be "*searched, your books get wet*," which he said is one of the underlying challenges. This analysis prompts the researcher to wonder how they navigate studying amid the book shortage, as the available books are destroyed during searches. Lumadi (2024) provides an in-depth understanding of how violence also affects learners' concentration, thus increasing poor academic performance, classroom chaos, bunking of classes, and depression.

Finally, overcrowding and emotional distress further inhibit learning. Mduduzi explained that there were "*46 people inside a room*" and that all of them were "*making noise*," which was affecting those who were studying. This paints a picture of an inmate trying to concentrate on his studies amid noise, trauma, and grief in a prison within a prison**.** These factors illustrate how institutional and emotional conditions are deeply intertwined**,** affecting focus, mental health, and academic performance. From a social justice perspective, such overcrowding and emotional neglect represent structural violence, a form of harm that is less visible but equally damaging. Together, these accounts reflect the paradox of rehabilitation within an oppressive institution. On the one hand, education is promoted as a tool for reform and on the other hand, the conditions under which it is offered often hinder its success. As Freire (1970) reminds us, true liberation must involve changing both the individual and the environment. Until correctional institutions are restructured to support learning not just symbolically, but materially and structurally, rehabilitative goals will remain largely aspirational for many incarcerated youths.

4.4.3 Resources Limitations

Despite aspirations for reform through education within correctional spaces, participants' narratives reveal that learning remains constrained by resource limitations, particularly in access to digital resources, infrastructure, and educational materials. These constraints not only hinder academic achievement but also reproduce systemic inequalities, particularly the digital divide, which is a form of structural injustice (Hopkins & Farley, 2015; Jewkes, 2008).

> **Siyabonga**: "*Sometimes, yeah, you see here at school, there is internet access, but you know also there will come a time when I will need to do more research. I'm supposed to complete more assignments, but here in the cells, you have limited time to use the internet. Most of the learners would also want to do the research in the computer room, but I wouldn't be able to have that access due to how many learners using that computer that day. I would have to wait for the next day for me to do my research. They should allow us to have our cell phones and laptops for research*."

> **Hopewell**: "*learning facilities like the library, the computer room, I think, yeah, they are enough for us to carry on learning within the centre*"

Sanele: "*We have a library, as you can see here.*"

Charlie: "*I think more access to technology and the internet... books will just go missing or damaged... I'm old now. I have no time to fight for those things. k. Short, it's only technology. That's it. Computer access. That's the only problem. We have all the books we need. We have good teachers. I think we have some of the best teachers. The teachers do a lot of printouts.*"

Ayanda*:* "*We are given stationery, and we have qualified teachers.*"

Mduduzi: "*Books and texts are there. And they are enough for those who want to study. But there are too many people there who don't want to go to school. They can be afforded to come to school. There is too much space for them. It helps us a lot*."

Participants provided their narratives with a mixed understanding of access to and use of material resources within the centre. For example. Hopewell, Sanele, Charlie, and Ayanda express that they have access to "*the library*" and textbooks, saying, "*We have all the books we need*." This shows that the incarcerated youth are also provided with 'stationery'. Books and texts are also sufficient for those who wish to pursue their studies. One can therefore conclude that the basic resources necessary for effective study are available. According to Miselo (2018), it is the responsibility of incarceration centres to provide the resources that would enable offenders to study effectively. This is contrary to studies by Roesseger et al. (2021) and Sibanyoni (2025), who found that within correctional centres, material resources were limited and sometimes even absent.

However, Siyabonga, Charlie, and Mduduzi highlighted the challenges of digital exclusion, complaining of a lack of "*I think more access to technology and the internet.*" Charlie also indicated that his only issue was access to computers and technology. Their narratives reflect both limited infrastructure and time-bound access, which create learners who compete for limited resources and reduce the depth of engagement during learning. Such conditions contrast with the principles of equity and inclusion in education, as emphasised in social justice frameworks and in the prison education literature (Emasealu, 2018; Arguelles & Ortiz-Luis, 2021). Freire's (1970) concept of critical consciousness

emphasises helping students identify the specific conditions that make it hard for them to learn, including institutional choices about infrastructure and time. By identifying "*Internet access*," "*computers*," and "*technology*" as problems, Siyabonga, Charlie, and Mduduzi begin to read their situation as a structural problem, not an individual failure.

Furthermore, the infrastructural challenge appears to be contributed to by overcrowding and learner demand. Siyabonga described having to wait until the next day to access computers due to high demand: "*Most of the learners would also want to do the research… I would have to wait for the next day.*" This delay is not merely a logistical issue; it reflects the slow pace of rehabilitation, which could easily demotivate or alienate learners striving to better themselves. The lack of consistent, equitable access to resources diminishes their capacity to question, reflect, and transform their realities. (Freire, 1970). The institutional refusal to support digital inclusion keeps incarcerated learners trapped in an outdated model of education, reinforcing both the stigma and the cycle of marginalisation.

Frustrated by this bottleneck, Siyabonga also suggested, "*If we can be allowed to use our phones so we can gain more internet access, that would be better.*" This call for personal access to technology reflects a desire for self-directed learning**,** yet institutional security protocols curtail it. Similarly, Charlie quickly pointed out that "*it is only technology. That is it. Computer access. That is the only problem.*" Their comments reveal that while the infrastructure may exist, its functionality, reliability, and availability remain highly inadequate**.** Participants requested "*access to mobile phones and laptops*," a request repeated by Siyabonga and others, echoing similar findings from studies across global contexts that highlight the importance of digital literacy and technological inclusion in prison education (Romero-Seseña et al., 2025; Atuase & Filson, 2024). The potential for educational equity is undermined when access to tools like the internet and computers is rationed or unreliable. Sandile reflected that "*learning life orientation*" helped him understand how to "*motivate the learners*" and "*approach people*," but without regular access to digital tools, this knowledge remains limited in scope and application.

Ultimately, while some resources are acknowledged as sufficient, including books, teachers, and stationery, the digital and technological limitations represent a new layer of educational exclusion, echoing broader social inequalities. As Hussain et al. (2023) argue, prison libraries and access to digital tools are essential for promoting autonomy, personal growth, and future reintegration. Until correctional institutions address these systemic resource gaps, incarcerated learners will remain educationally handicapped, their rehabilitation efforts slowed not by lack of will, but by lack of institutional support. What is also evident is the appreciation by Charlie and Ayanda that they have access to "*good, qualified teachers*" who are among "*the best teachers*." These teachers "*often rely on printouts*" when digital access is unavailable. For these participants, having access to committed and helpful teachers is crucial to their learning, highlighting the continued dominance of traditional paper-based methods as an alternative to technological limitations.

Further, the absence of dynamic digital resources continues to limit their learning potential. There is a further limitation in that whilst "*books and are there… and…enough for those who want to study, books will go missing or damaged.*" This demonstrates the wilful destruction of valuable resources by those who do not want to go to school. Charlie's acceptance and decision, "*I have no time to fight for those things*," can be understood in two ways. Firstly, the mature attitude that becoming upset over material resources will prevent him from completing his task of getting maximum learning. This reflects a critical, self- reflective thinker who understands what is essential to his future freedom. Secondly, the acceptance could also be understood as defeat, and acceptance of it is seemingly a normalised practice within the correctional centre. Instead of fighting about it then, he "*just ask for another book*." This could be an acceptance of poor behaviour and an understanding that there is an endless supply of books, which does not account for learners who may come in the future and not have access, as the supply of books is no longer available. Such disruptions reflect a lack of institutional control and protection of learning materials, further discouraging learning for those marginalised in the future.

4.4.4 Role of Gang Culture in Shaping the Educational Environment

Narratives from incarcerated learners indicate that gang culture wields a significant influence within correctional facilities, impacting both safety and educational engagement. As a result, despite the disruptive involvement and presence of gangs, education serves as a vehicle through which incarcerated youth can contest social domination and regain autonomy over their learning processes and future paths. Here are the narratives:

> **Mduduzi**: "*There are too many things that are happening. Some other people are stabbing each other because of numbers' gang*."

> **Siyabonga**: "*Some who are ruled by the numbers gang, and they are forced not to study. They don't care about anything, because their mind is so full of gangsterism…Majority of us are gang members, but we do not allow that to dictate us in terms of education***.** *Yes, we sometimes get booed by other sections because we have chosen to study. They feel like we have left them and left gangsterism.*"

> **Ayanda**: "*Becoming a member of a gang does not stop anyone to get education, and some of us have already joined the 26s and 28s, but because of education, I am now focused on it only. And they don't control us…*"

> **Charlie**: "*You see, with the number, in jail there's a number, so there's 26s, 27s, 28s, the gangs in the jail. That influences the boys, because once they join the thing, it's different, you know, like, you get different ranks, and they control them. And that's the thing; they get controlled through that. When they say jump, the boys must ask how high, and that can stop them from coming to school.*"

> **Sandile**: "*There are gang members that you are forced to join in order to have a safe life. The things that you are supposed to do when you are here in order to not go to the bhoda* [die] ."

> "*I grew up in a not good background. I grew up watching things. Our uncles and my brother were criminals in the gangs. Now I want to be like my parents. I didn't have a dream while I was outside.*"

All the participants describe the harsh realities of prison life, where violence is endemic and often as a result of gang affiliation. Here, loyalty to the numbers gangs is

demonstrated by inmates "*stabbing each other*". The numbers gang is impossible to avoid, as the "*majority of us are gang members.*" These circumstances are not isolated because they point to a broader prison culture shaped by and dominated by violence, intimidation, and hierarchy, often maintained by structured gangs like the "*26's, 27's, and 28s*." As Griffin, Pyrooz, and Decker (2013) explain, such gangs play a dominant role in governing internal prison life, including access to resources, movement, and even informal rules of behaviour. What is also revealed in the data is that education and gang affiliation are in tenuous relationships with one another.

On the one hand, it seems to be at opposite ends, where gang affiliation is about demonstrating loyalty, taking action, and disregarding education. Some participants reported that gang rules **e**xplicit**ly** discourage or even prevent educational participation, as they are "*ruled by the numbers gang*", and Charlie echoed this by saying: "*They control them. When they say jump, the boys must ask how high they are, and that can stop them from coming to school.*" The participants' accounts align with sociological insights that gangs maintain symbolic and coercive control, not only through violence but also by dictating acceptable behaviours among members (Pyrooz & Decker, 2019; Wooldredge, 2020).

Moreover, gang affiliation is prized and valued, and those who choose to study are othered, where they "*are booed by other sections*." Pitting those who decide to study against those who want to be gang members is an act of power cojoined by fear. The fear stems from being forced to join to have a safe life. However, joining the gang could also mean that "*you going to bhoda* [die] ."

On the other hand, despite this pressure, many participants demonstrated a strong sense of agency and resistance to the controlling narrative that education is of little value to gang members (Key et al., 2019). Siyabonga and Ayanda admitted to being members of the numbers gang. According to Freire (1970), people should develop critical consciousness to recognise social, political, and economic discrepancies and to act against oppressive elements. Despite their gang affiliations and the prevailing narrative

about gang members and education, Siyabonga and Ayanda's decision to pursue education highlights their journey towards critical consciousness. They recognise the restrictive narratives imposed on them, but refuse to internalise these ideas, instead re-imagining their potential beyond gang affiliation and incarceration. However, they challenge the normative understanding that you cannot be educated.

On the other hand, Siyabonga indicated that it does "*not allow that to dictate us in terms of education.*" Moreover, Ayanda insisted that his only focus will be on education and argued that the gangs don't "*control us.*" This, therefore, challenges participants' voices and the myth and assumption that gang membership often equates to disengagement from positive pursuits. Instead, they demonstrate how education can be a tool of internal liberation, offering participants an alternative identity and pathway beyond prison life. Education in this case becomes a space of social justice and individual transformation, even within oppressive conditions. Paulo Freire (1970), on critical consciousness, argued that when the incarcerated youth become critically aware of the challenges, they can break free from the cycles of gang influence and involvement and look at alternatives.

4.5 Coping Mechanisms and Navigating Strategies used by Incarcerated Learners

This section responds to the final research question, which examines how incarcerated youth navigate the challenges that affect their educational experiences. Here, two sub-themes: group learning mechanism and the supportive role of the teacher to incarcerated learners are examined. The above subthemes proved crucial to the academic success of the incarcerated participants studying for their NSC examination.

4.5.1 Group Learning as a Supportive Learning Mechanism

Incarcerated youth often navigate their educational journeys under challenging and restrictive circumstances; however, they demonstrate a remarkable ability to overcome negative factors and, in doing so, create and sustain a collaborative learning community. The participants' experiences and narratives reveal that peer learning not only further improves academic performance but also fosters solidarity, motivation, and emotional

support, thereby creating a space for agency within the prison environment (Wentzel & Watkins, 2002; Kebede et al., 2024). Participants indicated:

> **Mduduzi**: "*It's easy because our relationship, we are all in here, in this place. We feel the same things. If maybe you have a problem, you can talk to someone.*"

> **Siyabonga**: "*We all have the thing where we need to get our matric certificates with A's and distinctions and bachelor's, with bachelor passes and all that. I also call my classmate sometimes to come and discuss some chapters that are challenging and encourage them to study sometimes*."

> **Ayanda**: "*We help each other with everything, especially because we enjoy studying in groups, and we also divide into our cells, but that don't stop us from working together when we are in this school.*"

> **Sanele**: "*We work together. Even when we study, we create group discussions all of us, not just being alone, him being alone...The difference is that what can I say is the difference. Teachers outside, maybe it's about 50 learners in the class outside, so it's kind of hard to understand each and every one of them, what are his weakness, or her weakness, or his strength, so it's kind of hard to interact when they only come to deliver a lesson and then out, but teachers here get to know you, because there's not many of us studying around 25, us matriculants, we are 25. It's easy for them to interact with you and see where you're lacking and assist you in those areas where you're lacking. That's the difference...Some of you guys, if you know a certain subject better than others. There are people, there are some of learners who are just like us, who have finished their matrices. They are in the sections. They excelled in their subjects while they were here. And we normally seek for guardians to them and ask them.*"

> **Siyabonga**: "*But I have to study because some of the inmates who were already schooling, they came to me and told me more that* [name of the correctional facility] *is a good place I can further my studies at, and it can help you get more knowledge on your sentence.*"

> **Charlie**: "*The relationship with the boys who study is better than the relationship with the boys who don't study. Because we all have a goal, we all know where we're going. So, there's not as much fighting and trouble between us because we tolerate each other more. Because we don't want to mess this opportunity up. So that's why we tolerate each other. We might not like each other, but we can work with one another*."

> **Kwanda**: "*We have a good relationship, but... You know, because we are all boys here, kept in one place. We sometimes argue about something, and then we make up something, you know, this, that thing. But there's a good relationship between us.*"

All participants believe in the benefits of working in collaborative groups to "*get their matric certificates*". Siyabonga and Ayanda's experiences serve as an example of how youths in correctional institutions actively support one another's academic success by regularly forming groups to discuss complex and "*challenging*" subjects. Paulo Freire's (1970) Pedagogy of the Oppressed, which stresses the value of dialogical learning and the collaborative construction of knowledge to facilitate critical learning, resonates with this phenomenon. Siyabonga, in particular, uses words like '*we*' to convey the collective and collaborative nature of peer learning.

Further, Siyabonga and Charlie have dreams and aspirations, as they all have a "*goal*": to pass well, get "*A's*" and distinctions, and earn a bachelor's pass in their matric examination. Charlie also emphasises the benefits of using peer learning, noting that "*we all have a goal.*" These participants are future-oriented, believing that the NSC examination and programme will enable them all to achieve success. This means taking the initiative to "*call my classmates*" to study together. This study's findings and peer learning correspond with those of Mahlangu (2025), who found that peer learning within correctional institutions promotes solidarity, enhances educational outcomes, and bolsters resilience among participants (Mahlangu, 2025).

In this proposed study, offenders often aspire to or dream of things that motivate them to work harder. These dreams and aspirations foster a shared purpose by enabling learners to develop collective academic resilience in an environment that is often characterised by isolation and division. This collaborative approach to learning reflects what Topping (2005) terms "*peer-assisted learning*," where learners are both students and teachers. In the context of education in correctional spaces, this method is not a teaching strategy but a means of survival and resistance. According to Boud et al. (1999), peer learning promotes interdependence and accountability qualities, particularly valuable in spaces where formal teaching resources may be strained or limited.

Moreover, participants also show that the help they receive from their fellow inmates does not only come from existing groups studying towards their matric whilst incarceration, they also receive support from inmates who "*were already schooling*", and who "*had completed their matric*", These inmates help them by providing guidance and assistance for the matriculation examination at the prison school called "*Usethubeni*", The help is extended into other aspects, for example, Sanele learns and "*gets more knowledge on your sentence*." This reflects a powerful model of horizontal knowledge-sharing, where those slightly more experienced serve as mentors, cultivating what Elisha (2023) describes as "*convict therapy*," a rehabilitative process in which lived experience becomes a tool for guiding others. In this case, Elisha (2023) argued that convict therapy refers to an approach within correctional spaces to rehabilitate inmates through work, discipline, and education. It is based on the idea that moral correction, discipline, and obedience can be instilled in people through hard work (Elisha, 2023).

The benefits of this support group go beyond academic knowledge and skills. For Mduduzi, this was about emotional and social support, "*we are all in here, in this place. We feel the same things. If maybe you have a problem, you can talk to someone.*" This sense of empathic connection and emotional validation plays a role in keeping motivation and well-being, particularly in environments where psychological stress is prevalent. Ayanda added, "*We help each other with everything*." This illustrates how educational spaces in correctional centres become sites of resistance to the usual fragmentation and conflict imposed by incarceration. While differences remain due to background and personality, the learning community transcends social divisions. Charlie reinforced this by saying: "*The relationship with the boys who study is better than the relationship with the boys who do not study... we tolerate each other more because we do not want to mess this opportunity up*." Additionally, it extends to how working together contributes positively by depending on each other, and it also fosters a sense of responsibility.

4.5.2 Supportive Role of the Teacher to Incarcerated Learners

In prison education, the relationship between learners and teachers is crucial for personal

growth, engagement in learning, and rehabilitation (Zheng, 2022). Participants indicated:

Hopewell: "*I feel like we are closer to our teachers. Maybe I think maybe they understand us better*."

Sanele: "*Teachers here treat us all equally. We all get equal treatment in education. So, regardless of, maybe, before you came here, you were, maybe, unknown, or which is under the class. Everyone here is equal, and Teachers here will consider us all as students. No matter what you are registered for, what you are, what you're wearing, they treat us all the same*."

Sandile: "*Our relationship with the teachers is very good. They do not treat us like prisoners, even though we're in school; they treat us like learners. Okay. We are like learners to them, and then they're like parents to us…You see, if you are short of something, maybe buy or something, they gave you, if you go to them and tell them that we were running out of perfume, sleepers, flip-flops, you see, they pay for you*."

Charlie: "*They're always ready to help us, always ready to lend a hand. Sometimes they can be strict, yes, but that's the point. They're like parents*."

Mduduzi: "*The prison staff, the teachers. Yeah, they're supporting what they have. They're small money, they can use to buy those things. But it's depending on what kind of thing, because some others they take this as their advantage. Maybe they ask someone to give the teacher the things, and then they put drugs on it, in order to sell it in other ways, and then making a business about it. This can make the teacher to be in trouble, because they can pick out these things, and then the teacher can even lose their job because of learners…Can say that it is good. I ask them if I need assistance, even outside the classroom, maybe I need a tissue or Vaseline. I ask them. They are willing to help us*."

Siyabonga: "*They motivate us to study and give us visions and importance of education and depending on other people and that you always have to carry dirty money. They encourage us to study so we can depend on education and live a very clean life after reintegration. Some of the teachers they even phone our people, our parents outside and tell them, your son is doing this, your son is doing that, you should come and talk to him*."

Kwanda: "*They support me because when I need something, they buy it for me and then they come and... Like it's cold now. It's winter. We're coming from winter now. Okay. Yeah, so when I want like shoes, jackets or gloves, whether it's cold or it's hot, I have to be here in school. Yeah, yeah. Yeah, so they support me in that way*."

> **Sanele**: "*They give us extra lessons there … Even on Saturdays and Sundays, we are here studying. Saturday and Sunday.*"

The narratives above present a picture of the importance of teachers who are not only 'teachers' but also 'parents.' These are teachers who treat them with 'respect' and care for their learning and achievement, as well as for them on a personal level. Sandile and Mduduzi both described receiving help with basic needs, such as "*toiletries, like, issues, Vaseline, perfume, slippers, flip flops, and clothing.*" This reveals that educational staff assume a parental role, meeting their students' material and psychosocial needs. The narratives provided by the participants highlight that teacher–student interactions in correctional education transcend mere academic instruction, serving critical emotional, social, and rehabilitative roles that fall under the ambit of a parent, not a teacher. However, for these participants, this helps in their efforts towards rehabilitation. These relationships, which are built on respect and care, give incarcerated youth a sense of belonging and dignity. This is very different from the usual strict and controlling environment of correctional institutions (Costelloe & Warner, 2008; Ubah & Robinson, 2003). Moreover, Positive teacher-learner relations and classroom environments are critical factors that influence how learners experience school.

In the same way, teachers not only teach knowledge and skills but also help learners define who they are (Charles, 2002). A caring relationship for academic support is also evident in the narratives above. Hosseini et al. (2025) support this finding by arguing that compassionate and humanising relationships with teachers can be understood through a social justice lens as acts of recognition and empowerment.

Virat (2022) argues that teachers' care for incarcerated learners, especially those marginalised by systems of punishment, can mediate structural disadvantages and promote healing. This was noted by Siyabonga when he shared that the teachers "*motivate us to study …They encourage us to study so we can depend on education and live a very clean life after reintegration*." Moreover, we learn that it is possible to live a crime-free life upon returning to society. Thus, they can envisage a life where poverty may not exist,

and they can transform their lives and claim a place in society that is affirmed. Teachers within the prison can be seen as empowering allies, thereby mitigating recidivism (Thomas et al., 2008; Hilert & Haskins, 2022). To help participants pass, teachers went beyond their duties by giving extra lessons on weekends (Saturday and Sunday). This showed their belief in the students' ability to pass their matric examinations. These relationships made a real difference because they were not only emotionally supportive.

Mduduzi noted that even when resources are limited, a closer teacher–student relationship supports what Emslander et al. (2025) call a positive feedback cycle: better relationships lead to greater engagement, which, in turn, improves academic outcomes. Thus, Hughes et al. (2001, 2008) argue that such support plays a developmental role in learners' self- regulation, academic identity, and long-term motivation. Beyond the classroom, teachers in correctional settings often extend their care into their students' personal lives. Siyabonga explained that "*some of the teachers, they even phone our people, our parents*." This reflects an ethic of restorative accountability and involvement in rehabilitation that extends beyond teaching (Maryfield et al., 2020). Teachers serve as a bridge between incarcerated learners and their families, helping maintain connections and continuity (Darling-Hammond et al., 2019). Freire (1970) emphasises the importance of dialogical relationships where both teachers and students participate in a collaborative learning process characterised by mutual trust, respect, and the exploration of their realities.

The methods teachers use to build trust, show respect, and connect learning to students' lives reflect this collaborative approach and align with the concept of engagement grounded in trust, relevance, and openness (Finn & Zimmer, 2012). From a critical theory perspective, such practices are forms of critical pedagogy within an oppressive institution, through recognising learners' dignity, sustaining family relationships, and making education relevant to their futures. Teachers disrupt the prison narrative that defines them only as offenders and instead position them as students and community members in the making. According to Li et al. (2022), teachers who treat learners with respect and individual attention start a cycle in which good relationships enhance both student outcomes and teaching quality. These connections challenge institutional

dehumanisation, humanise learning, and demonstrate dedication to transformative education and social justice. It shows that teachers can be agents of change, dignity, and hope even in secure settings such as correctional environments (Zwane, 2017). In addition to being teachers, participants characterised their teachers as sympathetic parents and mentors who upheld their sense of self, community, and academic advancement (Tawana, 2020; Zheng, 2022; Ahmed, 2024; Madu, 2010).

4.6 Chapter Summary

This chapter presented and analysed the educational experiences of incarcerated youth preparing for the NSC examination within a correctional centre in KwaZulu-Natal. The findings indicate that education in correctional settings plays a critical role in shaping learners' aspirations, sense of purpose, and preparedness for reintegration. However, participants' educational experiences were significantly constrained by a range of structural, institutional, and social challenges.

The data revealed that factors such as gang influence, limited educational resources, and a curriculum that fails to adequately address learners' contextual realities hinder meaningful engagement in learning. In addition, the material conditions of incarceration, including overcrowding, lack of suitable study spaces, and disruptions caused by other offenders, further undermined participants' ability to study effectively and consistently.

Despite these challenges, the findings also demonstrated that incarcerated youth are not passive recipients of their circumstances. Participants actively negotiated and resisted negative experiences, illustrating a strong sense of agency within the constraints of the correctional environment. Central to this agency were supportive relationships with teachers and peers. Teachers were frequently described as mentors and parental figures who extended their role beyond academic instruction to provide emotional support, guidance, and motivation. Similarly, peer relationships and collaborative learning practices emerged as powerful sources of encouragement, enabling learners to support one another academically and emotionally.

Collectively, these findings underscore the dual nature of correctional education as both a site of constraint and a space of possibility, where agency, resilience, and hope can emerge despite systemic limitations. Building on these empirical insights, Chapter 5 synthesises the study's key findings, draws conclusions regarding the research questions and the conceptual framework, and offers recommendations for policy, practice, and future research in correctional education

In examining the educational experiences of incarcerated youth, the themes discussed in this chapter reveal how learning within correctional settings is deeply shaped by structural power, material conditions, and institutional constraints. The limited access to resources, highly regulated routines and surveillance practices reflects the forms of domination described by the critical theorists used and which frame incarcerated learners as objects of control rather than subjects of meaningful educational engagement. These material conditions contribute to experiences of marginalisation and dehumanisation, consistent with Freire's critique of oppressive educational environments.

Moreover, the participants' narratives show moments where dialogic interaction, peer collaboration, and supportive teacher–learner relationships enabled acts of agency. These instances resonate with Freire's (1970) concepts of humanisation and conscientization, where learners begin to critically engage with their circumstances, imagine alternative futures, and reclaim a sense of purpose. The ways in which learners navigated constraints demonstrate the tension between "banking" models of instruction, marked by rote delivery and compliance and more transformative, problem-posing approaches that promote reflection, self-direction, and empowerment.

By linking the empirical findings to the conceptual framework, the chapter demonstrates that educational experiences in correctional centres cannot be understood merely at the descriptive level but they must be interpreted within broader historical, social, and ideological forces that shape youth opportunities, aspirations, and pathways toward reintegration.

5. CHAPTER 5: REFLECTIONS, IMPLICATIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

5.1 Introduction

Chapter 4 presented and analysed the empirical findings of the study, drawing on participants' narratives to illuminate the educational experiences of incarcerated youth registered for the NSC examination in the province of KwaZulu-Natal. The findings revealed that, while education offers incarcerated youth a pathway towards personal development and future possibilities, their engagement with the NSC programme is shaped by multiple and intersecting challenges that they must continuously navigate to access meaningful learning opportunities.

This chapter brings the study to a close by reflecting critically on the overall research process and its outcomes. It revisits the key findings in relation to the main and subsidiary research questions, situating them within the theoretical and conceptual framework that informed the study. The chapter further reflects on the relevance and appropriateness of the methodological choices, including the research paradigm, qualitative approach, and data generation methods employed. In addition, the limitations encountered during the study are discussed, followed by recommendations for future research and practice in correctional education. The chapter concludes with final reflections on the study's contribution to understanding the educational experiences of incarcerated youth and the implications for policy, practice, and social justice.

5.2 Purpose and Significance of the Study

The primary purpose of this study was to explore the educational experiences of incarcerated youth registered for the NSC examination in the province of KwaZulu-Natal. This aim was guided by the following main research question:

- What are the educational experiences of incarcerated youth registered for the NSC examination in the province of KwaZulu-Natal?

To deepen this inquiry, the study was further guided by two subsidiary research questions:

- What factors influence the educational experiences of incarcerated youth in preparation for the NSC examinations?
- How do incarcerated learners navigate the factors that influence their educational experiences?

The findings of the study indicate that incarcerated youth encounter multiple, interrelated obstacles while preparing for the NSC examinations. These challenges include gang influence and violence, limited educational resources, institutional disruptions, restricted access to study materials, and a narrow range of subject streams available within the correctional centre. As participants highlighted, the confinement of subject choices to commerce and general streams constrained their academic and career aspirations. In addition to these institutional barriers, personal challenges such as interrupted schooling before incarceration, substance abuse, and family instability further complicated participants' educational trajectories (Emasealu, 2018; Hughes, 2016).

Collectively, these findings reveal a pattern of continuing disempowerment, where marginalisation experienced before incarceration is reproduced within the correctional environment. This continuity underscores the structural nature of educational exclusion faced by incarcerated youth and suggests that incarceration alone does not disrupt cycles of disadvantage. Without access to responsive, supportive, and contextually relevant educational opportunities, the prospects for meaningful reintegration and reduced recidivism remain limited (Brown, 2022; Russell, 2023; Fernandez, 2025).

The significance of this study lies in its contribution to understanding how correctional education, particularly NSC provision, can either reinforce existing inequalities or serve as a transformative intervention. By foregrounding the voices of incarcerated youth, the study highlights the urgent need for educational programmes that address both

academic and psychosocial dimensions of learning. Such programmes are essential not only for individual development but also for broader social goals of rehabilitation, reintegration, and social justice within the South African correctional system.

5.3 Reflections on the Conceptual Framework and Methodological Issues

This study was conceptually grounded in Paulo Freire's (1970) pedagogy of the oppressed and broader critical theory, which together provided a lens for understanding both the educational experiences of incarcerated youth registered for the NSC examination in KwaZulu-Natal and the research process itself. The conceptual framework did not function merely as an abstract theoretical backdrop; instead, it shaped how incarcerated youth were understood, how their narratives were interpreted, and how the study was designed and conducted.

Central to this framework is the premise that education is never neutral. The selection of Freire and critical theorists reflects an explicit commitment to examining how education can either reproduce or challenge inequality. The themes presented in Chapter 4, pathways to incarceration and reflection on consequences, adapting and thriving through learning in the correctional space, and factors influencing educational experiences, were interpreted through Freirean concepts such as banking versus problem-posing education, dehumanisation and humanisation, dialogue, praxis, culture of silence, reading the word and the world, and oppressor-oppressed relations. These concepts were further deepened through critical theory's emphasis on ideology, cultural hegemony, and false consciousness (Horkheimer, 1972), enabling the placement of NSC provision in correctional centres within broader structures of power, inequality, and social exclusion.

Methodologically, the conceptual framework aligned closely with a critical, qualitative, and narrative inquiry approach. Freirean and critical perspectives emphasise that power relations shape social reality and that research should move beyond description to critique and, where possible, contribute to transformation. This orientation justified the use of in-depth semi- structured interviews, narrative inquiry, and thematic analysis, as these methods foreground participants' voices and lived experiences. It also required a reflexive stance, prompting continuous reflection on the researcher's assumptions,

positionality, and role in producing knowledge about education in correctional spaces.

The framework further foregrounded the power dynamics inherent in the research relationship. In a highly regulated and hierarchical prison environment, Freire's emphasis on humanisation and dialogue suggested that the research process itself should strive to be respectful, participatory, and ethically sensitive. Methodologically, this meant allowing participants to narrate their experiences in their own words, without pressure to conform to predefined categories or dominant narratives. Moments of silence, hesitation, and emotional expression were treated not as methodological obstacles but as meaningful data that reflected the constraints and vulnerabilities of speaking within a correctional setting.

The concept of a culture of silence was particularly significant. The prison environment is characterised by surveillance, control, and the potential risks associated with speaking openly. This raised methodological concerns related to trust, confidentiality, and informed consent. Addressing these concerns required careful attention to the framing of interview questions, the management of privacy during interviews, and the interpretation of what participants chose not to say. It also demanded reflexivity regarding how the researcher's presence, the role of institutional gatekeepers, and the broader research context might either reinforce or disrupt silences.

Freire's ideas on conscientisation and reading the word and the world also shaped the analytical process. Methodologically, this meant moving beyond surface-level descriptive coding towards a more critical interpretation that linked individual narratives to broader social, institutional, and historical structures. At the same time, care was taken not to impose theoretical interpretations in ways that would overshadow participants' meanings or reduce their experiences to theoretical abstractions.

The use of concepts such as internalised oppression and false consciousness raised important ethical and representational considerations. There was a need to avoid pathologising participants or portraying them as lacking awareness. To address this, the analysis consistently foregrounded participants' own words, highlighted the

complexity of their reflections, and recognised their agency, resilience, and capacity for critical insight. The framework thus reinforced an understanding of incarcerated youth not only as individuals shaped by oppression but also as active agents who negotiate, resist, and reimagine their futures through education.

Finally, both Freire and critical theory emphasise that research itself can either liberate or domesticate. While this study cannot directly alter prison structures, policies, or curricula, it contributes by amplifying marginalised voices, exposing structural constraints, and highlighting the humanising potential of specific educational practices within correctional settings. Methodologically, this required clarity about the study's aims, limitations, and ethical responsibilities, as well as reflection on how the findings might inform future, more emancipatory approaches to correctional education.

5.4 Discussion of Findings

Guided by Paulo Freire's Pedagogy of the Oppressed and critical theory, this study examined the educational experiences of incarcerated youth registered for the NSC examination in a correctional centre in KwaZulu-Natal. Four interconnected themes emerged from the findings: pathways to incarceration and reflection on consequences; adapting and thriving through learning in prison; factors influencing the educational experiences of incarcerated youth; and coping mechanisms and navigation strategies used by incarcerated learners. Collectively, these themes demonstrate how education in correctional spaces can simultaneously reproduce dehumanising conditions and create opportunities for agency, humanisation, and transformation.

5.4.1 Pathways to Incarceration and Reflection on Consequences

Although this theme does not directly address a specific research question, it provides critical contextual insight into participants' motivations for engaging in education while incarcerated. Participants' narratives revealed that pathways into crime were strongly shaped by the normalisation of alcohol and drug use, which impaired judgement and limited their ability to anticipate long-term consequences. This finding aligns with research indicating that a significant proportion of incarcerated individuals committed

offences while under the influence of substances (Martin, 2001; Eriksson et al., 2021). In South Africa, early exposure to substance use and violence within contexts of poverty and inequality has been shown to increase the likelihood of school dropout and violent crime among youth (Geyer et al., 2015; Goliath et al., 2022; Sommer et al., 2017).

From a Freirean perspective, these experiences reflect dehumanisation, where structural conditions restrict human potential and entangle individuals in cycles of violence and self- destruction (Freire, 1970). Participant narratives further highlighted the influence of toxic and hegemonic masculinities, where violence and retaliation are constructed as markers of manhood (Ratele & Suffla, 2011; Mthembu, 2015; Ndhlovu, 2025). Such norms can be understood as forms of internalised oppression, whereby marginalised youth absorb dominant ideologies that ultimately perpetuate their own marginalisation (Freire, 1970).

Regret and moral reflection emerged as significant subthemes. Many participants reported that incarceration created a space for introspection, where they confronted the consequences of their actions, including fractured family relationships and missed life milestones. For some, this reflection contributed to identity reconstruction and moral development, consistent with research suggesting that incarceration can foster critical self-reflection under supportive conditions (McCuish et al., 2018; Stevens, 2012). However, this process was uneven. While some participants demonstrated deep accountability and emerging critical consciousness, others displayed limited empathy or responsibility, underscoring that incarceration alone does not guarantee rehabilitation (Stojkovska-Stefanovska, 2019). This variability reinforces Freire's argument that humanisation and praxis depend on both individual readiness and enabling environments.

5.4.2 Educational Experiences of Incarcerated Youth Preparing for the NSC

The second theme directly addresses the main research question by illuminating how participants experienced education as they prepared for the NSC examination. Participants consistently described engagement in the NSC programme as

transformative, offering a sense of purpose, dignity, and future possibility. Education was frequently framed as a "second chance" and a means of resisting the fatalism associated with incarceration. This finding aligns with studies demonstrating that prison education can support rehabilitation, reduce recidivism, and enhance post-release outcomes (Blomberg et al., 2012; Nally et al., 2012; Pompo, 2021).

From a Freirean lens, participants' experiences illustrate a shift from banking education towards problem-posing education, where learners moved from passive compliance to intentional, reflective engagement. Participants such as Sanele and Kwanda described how studying enabled them to question their past decisions, reinterpret their social realities, and imagine alternative futures. In Freire's terms, they began to "read the word and the world," using education to understand both academic content and the structural forces shaping their lives (Freire, 1970).

Education was also experienced as a deeply humanising practice. Participants reported regaining self-worth, improving communication and conflict-management skills, and reconstructing their identities as students and future contributors to society. These findings support research that positions correctional education as a site of social justice and identity restoration, particularly when it affirms learners' dignity and agency (Bjursell et al., 2025; Curtis et al., 2021; Wang, 2016).

5.4.3 Factors Influencing Educational Experiences

The third theme addresses the first subsidiary research question by examining the structural and contextual factors that shape educational participation. Participants identified a limited curriculum, restricted subject streams, inadequate infrastructure, and security-related disruptions as significant barriers. The absence of science, agriculture, and vocational subjects constrained learners' aspirations and career pathways, forcing them into narrow academic choices that did not always align with their interests or strengths. This finding echoes South African research highlighting the misalignment between prison curricula and the diverse needs of incarcerated learners (Behan, 2014; Kabeta & Pretorius, 2018; Metsing, 2018).

Participants also described poor physical conditions, including damaged classrooms, lack of lighting, theft of learning materials, and cold environments, which undermined concentration and motivation. From a critical-theory perspective, these conditions are not accidental but reflect broader patterns of structural neglect and under-prioritisation of correctional education (Giroux, 2011). Gang violence further compounded these challenges, restricting access to classes and creating an atmosphere of fear. However, some participants actively resisted gang pressure, asserting their commitment to education as an act of defiance, an expression of praxis in Freirean terms.

Despite these barriers, participants acknowledged the presence of committed teachers who improvised resources and advocated for more relevant skills-based training. Their desire for vocational skills reflects an awareness of post-release labour-market discrimination and aligns with research showing that incarcerated individuals seek education as a strategy for self-employment and economic survival (Chin, 2018; Griffith & Young, 2017).

5.4.4 Coping Mechanisms and Navigation Strategies

The fourth theme addresses the second subsidiary research question by examining how incarcerated learners navigate educational challenges. Peer learning emerged as a critical coping strategy, with participants forming study groups, sharing knowledge, and supporting one another academically and emotionally. These practices reflect Freire's emphasis on dialogue and horizontal learning, where knowledge is co-constructed rather than imposed (Freire, 1970). Such collaborative learning communities provided both academic support and a sense of belonging, mitigating the isolating effects of incarceration (Dewey et al., 2020).

Teachers were also central to participants' navigation strategies. Participants described teachers as mentors and parental figures who offered emotional support, material assistance, and encouragement beyond formal instruction. This relational pedagogy aligns with Freire's insistence that education grounded in care, dialogue, and respect is essential for humanisation. Consistent with Carrigan and Maunsell (2014), participants were more motivated and engaged when they perceived their education as

respectful, relational, and future-oriented.

Together, these findings illustrate how incarcerated youth actively construct spaces of learning, support, and hope within dehumanising environments. While structural constraints remain significant, the presence of supportive relationships and collaborative practices enables learners to exercise agency and sustain motivation, underscoring the transformative potential of correctional education when grounded in humanising pedagogical principles.

5.5 Implications of the Study

This study has important implications for correctional education policy, educational practice, and rehabilitation and reintegration strategies for incarcerated youth preparing for the NSC examination in South Africa. The findings affirm that education in correctional spaces should not be treated as an auxiliary or optional service but as a central mechanism for humanisation, rehabilitation, and social reintegration (Deaton, 2005; Fantuzzo, 2022).

5.5.1 Policy Implications for Correctional Education

At a policy level, the findings highlight the need for the DCS to re-evaluate the scope and structure of educational provision in correctional centres. Currently, the limited availability of subject streams, primarily general and commerce, restricts learners' academic and career trajectories. Expanding subject offerings to include science, agriculture, and vocationally oriented subjects would enable incarcerated youth to pursue more diverse and market- relevant pathways aligned with their interests, strengths, and post-release realities.

The study also underscores the urgent need for increased investment in educational infrastructure and learning resources. Poor lighting, inadequate classroom conditions, insufficient storage for study materials, and restricted access to digital resources significantly undermine learners' ability to engage meaningfully with the NSC curriculum. Addressing these structural deficiencies is essential for ensuring consistent

curriculum delivery and for affirming education as a constitutional right rather than a conditional privilege.

Furthermore, education policy within correctional centres should be integrated more deliberately with reintegration planning. Recognising that criminal records often limit access to formal employment, correctional education must be linked to vocational training, entrepreneurship development, and self-employment pathways. Aligning educational provision with broader labour-market and reintegration strategies would position education as a cornerstone of social reintegration rather than a symbolic gesture of rehabilitation.

5.5.2 Implications for Pedagogical Practice

The findings strongly suggest that correctional schools should adopt Freirean, humanising pedagogical approaches that recognise incarcerated learners as thinking subjects with valuable lived experiences. Such approaches promote dialogue, critical reflection, and active engagement, in contrast to the banking model of education, which positions learners as passive recipients of knowledge. Humanising pedagogies are critical in correctional contexts, where learners are routinely subjected to dehumanising institutional practices.

Teachers emerged as pivotal figures in participants' educational journeys, often assuming roles that extend beyond academic instruction to include mentorship, advocacy, and emotional support. This highlights the need for ongoing professional development and psychological support for correctional educators. Training in trauma-informed, caring, and critical pedagogical practices would enable teachers to respond more effectively to learners' emotional, cognitive, and social needs while fostering empowering learning environments.

In addition, the findings demonstrate the value of peer learning and collaborative study practices. Peer learning not only enhances academic achievement but also strengthens self- esteem, emotional resilience, and social cohesion, while mitigating the influence of gang culture and stigma. Correctional centres should therefore actively facilitate

structured peer learning initiatives as part of formal educational programmes.

5.5.3 Implications for Rehabilitation and Reintegration

Beyond academic outcomes, the study highlights the transformative role of education in identity reconstruction, moral reflection, and the restoration of dignity. For many participants, educational engagement provided the first meaningful opportunity to reflect critically on their actions, experience remorse, and develop accountability. These processes are central to rehabilitation but are often absent from punitive correctional regimes.

Accordingly, structured opportunities for reflection on crime, harm, responsibility, and social belonging should be intentionally incorporated into correctional education programmes, including NSC studies. Integrating restorative and critical learning approaches would allow learners to connect academic content with ethical reasoning and social understanding, potentially leading to deeper rehabilitative outcomes and more sustainable reintegration.

5.6 Limitations of the Study

Research conducted within correctional environments is widely acknowledged as methodologically and ethically complex due to the highly regulated, securitised, and unpredictable nature of these spaces (Wortley, 2002). Incarcerated individuals are classified as a vulnerable population, requiring heightened ethical sensitivity, careful planning, and ongoing negotiation with institutional authorities (Lucic-Catić, 2011). Scholars further note that rigid institutional routines, last-minute operational changes, and restricted researcher access frequently constrain data generation and limit opportunities for sustained participant engagement (Hoult, 2018). Consistent with this body of literature, several limitations were encountered during this study.

One notable limitation related to the physical environment in which interviews were conducted. Persistent noise from incarcerated individuals singing in other sections of the correctional facility disrupted interview sessions. These interruptions disrupted the flow

of conversation, reduced participants' concentration, and compromised audio recording quality. Although interviews were paused during peak noise periods and resumed when conditions improved, some recordings were partially affected, necessitating careful transcription verification. While these disruptions did not invalidate the data, they underscore the constraints of conducting qualitative research in environments not designed to support reflective dialogue.

A second limitation concerned restricted privacy during data collection. At times, other offenders observed interviews through windows out of curiosity, which caused discomfort among participants, particularly when discussing sensitive personal experiences. Such exposure risked inhibiting openness and emotional expression. To mitigate this, requests were made for a more secluded interview space, and communication with correctional staff and educators was maintained to minimise interruptions. Participants were repeatedly reassured of confidentiality and anonymity, which helped foster trust. Nevertheless, the inability to guarantee complete privacy reflects a structural limitation inherent in correctional research settings.

Third, participant availability posed logistical challenges. Interviews were frequently postponed because participants were engaged in trial or preparatory examinations. While this resulted in significant delays to the data collection schedule, prioritising participants' educational responsibilities was ethically necessary and aligned with the study's values. To manage this challenge, daily communication with the correctional school principal was instituted to confirm availability. This approach ensured that interviews were conducted when participants were cognitively and emotionally prepared to engage. In some cases, participants indicated that the interview process itself served as a reflective outlet, suggesting that, despite delays, meaningful engagement was achieved.

Finally, a substantial limitation related to the protracted process of obtaining institutional permission to conduct the study. Securing approval from the DCS and the correctional centre took approximately eighteen months, significantly extending the overall duration of the research. This delay reflects broader systemic barriers faced by researchers in correctional contexts and has implications for the study timeline. While unavoidable, this

constraint highlights the need for realistic planning and extended timelines when undertaking research in highly regulated institutional environments.

Despite these limitations, the study generated rich, credible data through adaptive methodological strategies and ethical reflexivity. The challenges encountered did not undermine the integrity of the findings but rather contextualised them within the realities of conducting research in correctional settings.

5.7 Recommendations for Future Research

The findings of this study point to several important avenues for future research on correctional education and rehabilitation, particularly regarding incarcerated youth preparing for the NSC examination. While this study provides in-depth insights into learners' educational experiences within a specific correctional context, further empirical work is required to deepen understanding and inform evidence-based policy and practice.

Firstly, longitudinal research is needed to examine the long-term outcomes of completing the NSC while incarcerated. Future studies should track learners beyond release to explore how participation in NSC programmes influences post-release trajectories, including employment opportunities, access to higher or further education, social reintegration, and recidivism rates. Such research would provide critical evidence on whether formal schooling in correctional settings translates into sustainable life opportunities and reduced reoffending.

Secondly, future research should adopt a comparative and intersectional approach to examine how educational experiences differ according to age, gender, socio-economic background, prior schooling history, language, and family support. Understanding how these intersecting factors shape learners' engagement, motivation, and success in correctional education would allow for more differentiated and responsive programme design, particularly for youth who have experienced prolonged educational marginalisation before incarceration.

Thirdly, the study highlights the need for focused research on the influence of gang

affiliation and prison subcultures on educational participation. Further investigation is required to understand how gang dynamics affect learners' access to classes, sense of safety, motivation to study, and academic performance. Research in this area could also explore protective factors, such as peer learning groups and supportive teacher relationships, that enable some learners to resist gang pressure and persist with their education.

Fourthly, there is a clear need for research on digital and blended learning in correctional environments. Future studies should assess the availability, accessibility, and pedagogical effectiveness of digital learning tools in prisons, as well as the security and policy constraints that limit their implementation. Exploring how carefully regulated digital platforms can support independent learning, examination preparation, and digital literacy would be particularly valuable in preparing incarcerated youth for participation in an increasingly digital society.

In addition to qualitative inquiry, future research should incorporate quantitative and longitudinal approaches to complement the findings of this study. Quantitative studies could measure patterns related to educational performance, resource allocation, and post-release trajectories among incarcerated, providing broader generalisability. Longitudinal studies would enable researchers to track learners' educational outcomes and reintegration experiences over time, offering deeper insight into how correctional schooling shapes long-term personal, social, and economic pathways. Together, these approaches would enhance credibility, methodological rigour, and the evidence base for policy reform in correctional education.

Finally, future research should include comparative studies across provinces and correctional facilities, as well as research that incorporates the perspectives of educators, correctional officials, and policymakers. Such multi-stakeholder and multi-site studies would contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of systemic strengths and weaknesses in correctional education provision and support the development of coherent, nationally responsive strategies.

Collectively, these research directions would extend the contributions of the present study and support the development of more equitable, humanising, and effective educational interventions for incarcerated youth in South Africa.

5.8 Contribution to Research

This study makes a meaningful contribution to the field of correctional education research by foregrounding the educational experiences of incarcerated youth preparing for the NSC examination within correctional facilities in KwaZulu-Natal. While existing South African scholarship has examined prison education broadly, there remains a notable scarcity of empirical studies that centre the lived experiences of NSC learners in correctional settings, particularly within the KwaZulu-Natal context (DCS, 2020; Mahlangu, 2024; Segalo & Sihlobo, 2021). By focusing specifically on this under-researched group, the study fills a critical gap in the literature and deepens understanding of how formal schooling is experienced in the context of incarceration.

The study contributes to knowledge by providing a nuanced, learner-centred account of the challenges and possibilities of completing the NSC while incarcerated. Through narrative inquiry and qualitative analysis, it moves beyond policy-level discussions of access and compliance to illuminate the everyday realities of studying in a highly regulated, resource- constrained, and often dehumanising environment. In doing so, the research highlights how structural barriers, such as limited subject offerings, institutional disruptions, gang dynamics, and inadequate learning resources, intersect with personal histories of educational marginalisation to shape learners' educational trajectories.

This contribution builds on earlier work, such as Gasa's (2011) study on prison students, which demonstrated that incarcerated learners can achieve high pass rates and that prison education is associated with improved behaviour, increased hope, and reduced recidivism. While these studies establish the value of correctional education outcomes, the present study extends this body of work by foregrounding learners' voices and examining how education is experienced as a process rather than merely an outcome. It reveals how incarcerated youth actively negotiate constraints, draw on peer and teacher support, and exercise agency in pursuing education as a pathway to dignity, self-worth,

and imagined futures beyond prison.

Crucially, the study also contributes theoretically by applying Paulo Freire's pedagogy of the oppressed and critical theory to the analysis of NSC provision in correctional spaces. This lens enables a crucial interrogation of how education can simultaneously reproduce control and enable humanisation, thereby offering a more complex understanding of correctional schooling as a contested space of power, resistance, and possibility. In this way, the study advances both empirical and conceptual debates on correctional education in South Africa. It provides a foundation for more inclusive, learner-responsive, and socially just educational practices within correctional centres.

5.9 Concluding Remarks

This study explored the educational experiences of incarcerated youth preparing for the NSC examination within a correctional centre in KwaZulu-Natal, drawing on narrative inquiry, Paulo Freire's Pedagogy of the Oppressed, and critical theory as its conceptual and analytical lenses. Together, these frameworks enabled a critical and humanising reading of participants' lived experiences, illuminating how education within correctional spaces is shaped by power, inequality, and systemic exclusion, while also offering possibilities for agency, reflection, and transformation.

By centring the voices of incarcerated youth, the study contributes to the literature by addressing a significant empirical gap in South African correctional education research. It moves beyond policy intentions and performance indicators to provide a nuanced account of how young people experience education as a process of struggle, resilience, and meaning- making within a highly regulated environment. The findings demonstrate that incarcerated learners' educational journeys are deeply influenced by intersecting structural constraints, such as gang violence, limited learning resources, restricted subject choices, and institutional disruptions, alongside personal histories of educational marginalisation.

At the same time, the study highlights the transformative potential of education when it is experienced as affirming, relational, and purposeful. Participation in the NSC

programme enabled many learners to reclaim a sense of dignity, imagine alternative futures, and engage in critical reflection about their lives and choices. These findings underscore Freire's assertion that education can function either as an instrument of control or as a practice of freedom, depending on how it is structured, delivered, and experienced.

The study concludes that current correctional education policies and practices require more responsive, youth-centred, and contextually grounded approaches. Prison education should not be reduced to a compliance or performance-driven exercise for the DCS. However, it should be recognised as a substantive rehabilitative intervention with the potential to disrupt cycles of exclusion and recidivism. Addressing persistent barriers, such as inadequate resources, limited curriculum offerings, and unsafe learning environments, while strengthening supportive teacher-learner relationships and peer-learning structures, is essential for realising the constitutional promise of education for all.

Ultimately, this study affirms that when incarcerated youth are recognised as thinking, capable subjects rather than passive recipients of policy, education within correctional spaces can become a powerful site of humanisation, hope, and social reintegration.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A: Ethical Clearance Certificate

UNIVERSITY OF KWAZULU-NATAL
INYUVESI YAKWAZULU-NATALI

08 October 2025

Ntuthuko Sibonelo Mathenjwa (219028186)
School of Education (Prior Restructuring)
Pietermaritzburg Campus

Dear NS Mathenjwa,

Protocol reference number: HSSREC/00007103/2024
Project title: An Investigation of the educational experiences of incarcerated youth registered for the National Senior Certificate Examination in a prison in the province of KwaZulu Natal.
Amended title: An exploration of the educational experiences of incarcerated youth registered for the National Senior Certificate examination in a correctional centre in the province of KwaZulu Natal
Degree: Masters

Approval Notification – Amendment Application

This letter serves to notify you that your application and request for an amendment received on 07 October 2025 has now been approved as follows:

- Change in title
- Change in supervisor
- Old supervisor: Dr Saajidha Bibi Sader (24153)
- New supervisor: Dr Melanie Yvette Martin (33507)

Any alterations to the approved research protocol i.e. Questionnaire/Interview Schedule, Informed Consent Form; Title of the Project, Location of the Study must be reviewed and approved through an amendment /modification prior to its implementation. In case you have further queries, please quote the above reference number.

PLEASE NOTE: Research data should be securely stored in the discipline/department for a period of 5 years.

HSSREC is registered with the South African National Health Research Ethics Council (REC-040414-040).

Best wishes for the successful completion of your research protocol.

Yours faithfully

[redacted]
.....
Doctor Shamila Naidoo (Interim Chair)

/nng

Humanities & Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee
UKZN Research Ethics Office Westville Campus, Govan Mbeki Building
Postal Address: Private Bag X54001, Durban 4000
Tel: +27 31 260 8350 / 4557 / 3587
Website: http://research.ukzn.ac.za/Research-Ethics/
Founding Campuses: Edgewood Howard College Medical School Pietermaritzburg Westville

INSPIRING GREATNESS

Appendix B: Permission to Conduct Research in the KwaZulu-Natal Department of Education

KWAZULU-NATAL PROVINCE
EDUCATION
REPUBLIC OF SOUTH AFRICA

OFFICE OF THE HEAD OF DEPARTMENT

Private Bag X 9137, PIETERMARITZBURG, 3200
Anton Lembede Building, 247 Burger Street, Pietermaritzburg, 3201
Email: buyi.ntuli@kzndoe.gov.za Tel: 033 392 1051

Ref No.: 2/4/8/199
Enquiries: Mrs B. T. Ntuli

Mr Ntuthuko Sibonelo Mathenjwa
P.O. Box 60
INGWAVUMA
3968

Dear Mr Mathenjwa

PERMISSION TO CONDUCT RESEARCH IN THE KZN DoE INSTITUTIONS

Your application to conduct research entitled: "An exploration of educational experiences of of incarcerated youth registered for the National Senior Certificate examination in a correctional centre in the province of KwaZulu Natal:", In the KwaZulu Natal Department of Education institution has been approved. The conditions of the approval are as follows:

1. The researcher will make all the arrangements concerning the research and interviews.
2. The researcher must ensure that Educator and learning programmes are not interrupted.
3. Interviews are not conducted during the time of writing examinations in schools.
4. Learners, Educators, Schools and Institutions are not identifiable in any way from the results of the research.
5. A copy of this letter is submitted to District Managers, Principals and Heads of Institutions where the Intended research and interviews are to be conducted.
6. The period of investigation is limited to the period from **10 June 2024 to 31 December 2027**.
7. Your research and interviews will be limited to the schools you have proposed and approved by the Head of Department. Please note that Principals, Educators, Departmental Officials and Learners are under no obligation to participate or assist you in your investigation.
8. Should you wish to extend the period of your survey at the school(s), please contact Mrs Buyi Ntuli at the contact numbers above.
9. Upon completion of the research, a brief summary of the findings, recommendations or a full report/dissertation/thesis must be submitted to the research office of the Department. Please address it to The Office of the HOD, Private Bag X9137, Pietermaritzburg, 3200.
10. Please note that your research and interviews will be limited to schools and institutions in KwaZulu-Natal Department of Education.

[redacted]

Mr G.N. Ngcobo
Head of Department: Education
Date: 10 June 2024

GROWING KWAZULU-NATAL TOGETHER

Appendix C: Permission to Conduct Research in the Department of Correctional Services



correctional services

Department:
Correctional Services
REPUBLIC OF SOUTH AFRICA

RESEARCH ETHICS COMMITTEE
Private Bag X136, Poyntons Building, 124 W.F Nkomo Street, **PRETORIA**, 0001,
Tel (012) 307 2770, Enquiries: Ms S.T Mahlangu; Sylvia.Mahlangu@dcs.gov.za
Ref: REC 2024/25

Dear Mr N.S Mathenjwa,

AN EXPLORATION OF THE EDUCATIONAL EXPERIENCES OF YOUTH REGISTERED FOR THE NATIONAL SENIOR CERTIFICATE (NSC) EXAMINATION IN A CORRECTIONAL CENTRE IN THE PROVINCE OF KWAZULU-NATAL

It is with pleasure to inform you that your application to conduct research in the Department of Correctional Services (DCS) on the above topic has been **approved.**

Kindly note the following:

- This ethics approval letter is valid from **29/08/2024 to 29/08/2025**.
- The relevant Regional and Area Commissioners where the research will be conducted will be informed of your proposed research project.
- It is your responsibility to make arrangements for your interviewing times.
- Your identity document/passport and this approval letter should be in your possession when visiting regional offices/correctional centres.
- You are required to use the terminology used in the White Paper on Corrections in South Africa (2005) and Correctional Services Act (No.111 of 1998) e.g. "Offenders" not "Prisoners" and "Correctional Centres" not "Prisons".
- You are not allowed to use photographic or video equipment during your visits, however an audio recorder is allowed.
- You are required to submit a copy of your final report to the Department of Correctional Services

Should you have any enquiries regarding this process, please contact Ms E Mohapi assistance at telephone number (012) 307 2151 / 069 117 0309.

Thank you for your application and interest to conduct research in the Department of Correctional Services.

Yours sincerely

[redacted]

MR S ZIKALALA
DEPUTY COMMISSIONER: POLICY COORDINATION & RESEARCH (ACTING)
DATE: 29/08/2024

Lefapha la Ditirelo tsa Bosiamisi! • Lefapha le Ditshebeletso tse Tshokolosho • uMnyango weSevisi yokuQondisa iZinsilo
Mohasho wa Tshumelo dza Vhuhulamisi! • Departement van Korrektiewe Dienste • Kgoro ya Ditirelo tše Tshokollo
Ndzawulo ya Vutlamisi bya Vaboniwa • LiTiko leTekuvoonisiwa kweSinilo • lSebe leMonzo zoLuleko
UmNyango WezobuLungiswa bokuzuPhatha

Batho Pele - putting people first

Appendix D: Letter: Gatekeepers

Gatekeepers letter: Department of Correctional Services



School of Education,
College of Humanities,
University of KwaZulu-Natal,
Edgewood Campus, KwaZulu Natal
11 April 2024

Gatekeeper
Area commissioner
Durban Spine Road Westville

PO Box PRIVATE BAG X1

Westville

3630

Re: Request for permission to conduct research at prison.

Dear Area Commissioner

My name is Ntuthuko Sibonelo Mathenjwa. I am pursuing a Master's degree in Education in the discipline of Social Justice under the college of Humanities at Pietermaritzburg campus. The title of my research is, "***An investigation of the educational experiences of incarcerated youth registered for the National Senior Examination in a prison in a province of KwaZulu Natal***". I hereby seek permission to conduct by research with the prisoners who are currently participating in in the National Senior Certificate examination.

The study aims to investigate the experiences of incarcerated youth of the NSC examination as well as the factors that influence the educational experiences of incarcerated youth in preparation for NSC examinations. It further aims to investigate how participants navigate the factors that influence their educational experiences as incarcerated youth. The significance of the study is to gain more insight and knowledge of the experiences of incarcerated youth. It underlines how crucial it is to understand their experiences as well as what the obstacles are that influence their participation in the programme. Finally,

it will seek to understand what incarcerated youth do to overcome these obstacles to offer meaningful educational opportunities that support social justice and fair outcomes for young people who are incarcerated.

The data generation for this researched would be sourced from 8 incarcerated youth of the Prison. I hereby request permission to conduct research with NSC-registered Grade 12 students who are detained in your correctional facility. Every inmate who volunteers to be part of the study will be asked to participate in one semi-structured face-to-face interview. The interviews would be audio -recorded. The initial interview, which is scheduled to last 30-40 minutes. However, in the event follow up interviews are required (for clarification purposes) they should only last 30 minutes.

I would like to assure you that this study is just for educational purposes only, and I will not profit financially from it. The participants in the study and your correctional faculty would not suffer any negative effects because of the research's conduct. Pseudonyms would be used to protect the identity of the participants' and the institution. All information will be kept confidently. Since participation in the study is entirely voluntary, participants are free to stop at any moment. A registered counsellor will be available should the need arise.

I have herein attached The Statement of Consent that clarifies the protection of participants in this research.

Thank you.

Yours faithfully,

Ntuthuko Sibonelo Mathenjwa (student no. 219028186)

Cell no: [redacted]

Email: [redacted] 219028186@stu.ukzn.ac.za

Should you queries please contact any supervisor: Dr Saajidha Sader and Dr Melaine Martin

Contact details.

Cell: [redacted] Email: saders@ukzn.ac.za

Martinm@ukzn.ac.za

Telephone number: 033 260 6456/ 6148

DECLARATION (Station commissioner)

I_____ (Full names of the commissioner)

of_____ grant permission to Ntuthuko Mathenjwa to conduct research in the above-mentioned prison.

I understand that we are at liberty to withdraw from the project at any time, should we so wish.

....

Signature of Station commander Date

PRISON STAMP

Appendix E: Consent Letter to Participants



UNIVERSITY OF KWAZULU-NATAL
INYUVESI YAKWAZULU-NATALI

PARTICIPANTS CONSENT LETTER

UKZN HUMANITIES AND SOCIAL SCIENCES RESEARCH ETHICS COMMITTEE (HSSREC)

APPLICATION FOR ETHICS APPROVAL (For research with human participants)

Information Sheet and Consent to Participate in Research

Date:

Greetings,

My name is Ntuthuko Sibonelo Mathenjwa and I am a student at the University of KwaZulu Natal, School of Education. I am currently studying for my Masters degree in social justice education and my study is entitled: An investigation of the educational experiences of incarcerated youth registered for the National Senior Certificate Examination in a prison In a province of KwaZulu Natal. My contacts are as follows:

Student number: 219028186
Contact Number: +[redacted]
Email: [redacted]219028186@stu.ukzn.ac.za

International and national literature reviewed suggest that the experience of incarcerated youth is under – researched. Moreover, I have not found substantial literature that investigates the experiences of prisoners enrolled for the National Senior Certificate examination. There are various reasons as to why incarcerated youth engage in criminality and drop out of school without completing matric (Duke, 2018).

A part of the prison's programme is to help and support incarcerated youth through the development of various programmes like the National Senior Certificate examination. This is part of ensuring the education rights of all (Dorsi, 2019). Access to education can have direct impact on incarcerated youth by helping them to reintegrate into society once released and preventing redactivism (Redpath & Muntingh, 2012, Reddy & Soudien, 2014).

You are kindly invited to consider participating in a study investigating the educational experiences of incarcerated youth registered for the National senior Certificate (NSC). The aim and purpose of this study is to explore the educational experiences of incarcerated youth registered for the NSC examination in the province of KZN. It further aims to is to investigate the factors that influence the educational experiences of incarcerated youth in preparation for NSC examinations. Furthermore, will investigate the way in which participants navigate the factors that influence their educational experiences as incarcerated youth at Westville Prison

The study is expected to enroll a total of 15 respondents. It will involve in-depth individual semi-interviews about your of the NSC programme. The duration of the interview will be approximately 30-40 minutes.

Kindly note the following in respect of your participation in the study:

- Your participation is voluntary. If you do not participate you will not be penalized or disadvantage in any way.
- Your confidentiality is guaranteed as your input will not be attributed to you in person but reported only as a population member opinion. You will be required to choose a pseudonym for the study in order ensure confidentiality.
- The information received will be kept confidential and used solely for academic purposes of this research.

  There is no financial benefit involved. However, it is expected that insight and knowledge will be gained regarding the education experiences of incarcerated youth of the NSC examination.
- Data will be in the form of interviews transripts and will be stored in secure storage and destroyed by shredding after 5 years. Digitally recorded data will be deleted after 5 years.
- You have a choice to participate, not participate in the research. You will not be penalized for taking such action. You are free to withdraw from the study at any stage and for any reason.

- This study has been ethically reviewed and approve by the UKZN Humanities and Social Sciences Research Committee (approval number.....)

In the event of any problems or concerns/ questions you may contact the researcher's at Martinm@ukzn.ac.za; [redacted]

You may also contact the UKZN Humanities & Social Sciences Research Committee and the details as follows:

HUMANITIES & SOCIAL SCIENCES RESEARCH ETHICS ADMINSTRATION
Research Office, Westville Campus
Govan Mbeki Building
Private bag x 54001
Durban
4000
KwaZulu Natal, SOUTH AFRICA
Tel: 27 31 2604557- fax 27 31 260 4609
Email: HSSREC@ukzn.ac.za

Yours Sincerely,
Ntuthuko Mathenjwa
Contact details:
Email address: 219028186@stu.ukzn.ac.za/ [redacted]
Cellphone no: [redacted]

Appendix F: Sample Consent Form

CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE

I.....(FULL NAME OF THE PARTICIPANT) have been informed about the study entitled 'An Investigation of THE educational experiences of incarcerated youth registered for the National Senior Examination (NSC) in a prison in a province of KwaZulu Natal by Ntuthuko Mathenjwa. I understand the contents of this document and the nature of the research project and I consent to participating in the research project.

I understand the purpose and procedures of the study.

I have been given an opportunity to answer questions about the study and have had answers to my satisfaction.

I declare that my participation in this study is entirely voluntary and that I may withdraw at any time without affecting any of the benefits that I usually am entitled to.

I have been informed about any available compensation or medical treatment if injury occurs to me because of study-related procedures.
I voluntarily give permission for the interviews to be audio-recorded.
My identity will not disclose, and pseudonyms will be used to protect my identity.

If I have any further questions/concerns or queries related to the study, I understand that I may contact the researcher at 219028186@stu.ukzn.ac.za : +[redacted]

If I have any questions or concerns about my rights as a study participant, or if I am concerned about an aspect of the study or the researchers then I may contact:

HUMANITIES & SOCIAL SCIENCES RESEARCH ETHICS ADMINISTRATION
Research Office, Westville Campus
Govan Mbeki Building
Private Bag X 54001
Durban
4000
KwaZulu-Natal, SOUTH AFRICA

Tel: 27 31 2604557 - Fax: 27 31 2604609

Email: HSSREC@ukzn.ac.za

Additional consent, where applicable

I hereby provide consent to:

Audio-record my interview / focus group discussion YES / NO

_____ _____

Signature of Participant **Date**

_____ _____

Signature of Witness **Date**

(Where applicable)

Appendix G: Interview Schedule



UNIVERSITY OF KWAZULU-NATAL
INYUVESI YAKWAZULU-NATALI

APPENDIX 1: INDIVIDUAL INTERVIEW SCHEDULE

1. Biographical Information

Name (Please note that this is for record purposes only. Your name or the name of your institution will not be divulged in any way in any communications emanating from this project.)	

Age	

1st Language	
Other languages	

Highest Level of Education e.g., Grade 11	

2. **On Being Incarcerated**

2.1 How long have you been incarcerated and what are you currently serving time for?

Sekuyisikhathi esingakanani uboshiwe futhi yini oboshelwe yona?

2.2 What led to your incarcerations? (Probe: How do you feel about being incarcerated? Do you have regrets? What would you do differently?)

Yini eyaholela ekuvalelweni kwakho? (Uphenyo: Uzizwa kanjani ngokuboshwa? Uyazisola? Yini ongayenza ngendlela ehlukile?)

3. **Prior Educational Experience**

3.1 How would you describe your schooling experience before you were incarcerated? (Probe: Tell me about your schooling before your arrest and incarceration. Where did you go to school? What grade did you complete or were in when you were incarcerated? Did you enjoy going to school? Explain your answer.)

Ungakuchaza kanjani okuhlangenwe nakho kwakho kwesikole ngaphambi kokuba uvalelwe? (Uphenyo: Ngitshele ngesikole sakho ngaphambi kokuboshwa nokuboshwa kwakho. Uye kuphi esikoleni? Yiliphi ibanga owaliqeda noma wawukuliphi ngesikhathi uboshiwe? Wawukujabulela ukuya esikoleni? Chaza impendulo yakho.)

3.2 What would you do differently if you were still in school and not incarcerated?

Yini ongayenza ngendlela ehlukile uma usesesikoleni futhi ungaboshwa?

4. **Provision of Education & Training Opportunities**

4.1 What are your views on the role of education in the lives of incarcerated youth?

Yimiphi imibono yakho ngendima yemfundo ezimpilweni zentsha eboshiwe?

4.2 What educational programs are available to inmates? (Probe: Have you participated in the prison education programmes? If so, explain your experience of participating in the prison education programmes)

Yiziphi izinhlelo zemfundo ezitholakala eziboshweni? (Uphenyo: Usuke wabamba iqhaza ezinhlelweni zokufundisa ejele? Uma kunjalo, chaza isipiliyoni sakho sokuhlanganyela ezinhlelweni zokufundisa ejele)

4.3 Do all inmates have equitable access to the correctional education programmes as well as wider educational opportunities? Probe: Does one's social position in relation to race, class (socioeconomic background), ethnicity, etc. influence one's access to educational opportunities while incarcerated? If so, please explain.

Ingabe zonke iziboshwa ziyakwazi ukufinyelela ngokulingana ezinhlelweni zemfundo yokuqondisa izigwegwe kanye namathuba emfundo abanzi? Uphenyo: Ingabe isikhundla somuntu senhlalo maqondana nobuhlanga, isigaba (imvelaphi yezenhlalo nezomnotho), ubuzwe, njll sithonya ukufinyelela komuntu emathubeni emfundo ngenkathi eboshiwe? Uma kunjalo, sicela uchaze.

4.4 What support and resources are provided to inmates to continue with education while incarcerated? (Probe: What educational opportunities and resources do you think should be

made accessible to incarcerated youth to help them access educational opportunities and achieve success in their studies?)

Yikuphi ukwesekwa nezinsiza ezinikezwa iziboshwa ukuze ziqhubeke nemfundo ngenkathi ziboshiwe? (Uphenyo: Yimaphi amathuba emfundo kanye nezinsiza ocabanga ukuthi kufanele zenziwe zifinyeleleke entsheni eboshiwe ukuze ibasize bathole amathuba emfundo futhi bathole impumelelo ezifundweni zabo?)

4.5 Do inmates participate in the educational programmes provided? If yes, what is your view of the influence participation educational programmes has on incarcerated youth?

Ingabe iziboshwa zibamba iqhaza ezinhlelweni zemfundo ezinikeziwe? Uma yebo, uthini umbono wakho ngezinhlelo zokufundisa iqhaza lethonya ezinayo entsheni eboshiwe?

4.6 Do you believe that the educational opportunities provided to incarcerated youth are adequately addressing their needs and interests? Explain.

Uyakholelwa yini ukuthi amathuba emfundo anikezwa intsha eboshiwe abhekana ngokwanele nezidingo nezintshisekelo zayo? Chaza.

4.7 Have you participated in any prison educational programmes? (Probe: If yes, how would describe your experience of participating in any of prison educational programmes?

Usuke wabamba iqhaza kunoma yiziphi izinhlelo zokufundisa ejele? (Uphenyo: Uma yebo, kungakuchaza kanjani okuhlangenwe nakho kwakho kokubamba iqhaza kunoma yiziphi izinhlelo zokufundisa ejele?

4.8 Do you feel that participation in the prison educational programmes is beneficial and adequately prepares incarcerated youth for re-entry into society?

Unomuzwa wokuthi ukubamba iqhaza ezinhlelweni zokufundisa ejele kuyazuzisa futhi kulungiselela ngokwanele intsha eboshiwe ukungena kabusha emphakathini?

4.9 Have you received sufficient support in terms of academic counselling and career guidance to help plan for your educational and vocational goals post-incarceration?

Usuke wathola ukwesekwa okwanele mayelana nokwelulekwa kwezemfundo kanye nesiqondiso somsebenzi ukusiza ukuhlela izinhloso zakho zemfundo nezomsebenzi ngemuva kokuboshwa?

5. Experience of Access to Educational Opportunities

5.1 What are your aspirations? (Probe: Do you have plans to pursue your aspirations? Explain. Did your educational experiences prior to incarceration influence your aspirations to study now? Explain)

Yiziphi izifiso zakho? (Uphenyo: Unazo izinhlelo zokulandela izifiso zakho? Chaza. Ingabe okuhlangenwe nakho kwakho kwezemfundo ngaphambi kokuboshwa kwathonya izifiso zakho zokufunda manje? Chaza)

5.2 What motivated you to register and study for the National Senior Certificate (NSC) examination?

Yini eyakugqugquzela ukuba ubhalise futhi ufunde ukuhlolwa kweSitifiketi Esiphezulu Sikazwelonke (NSC)?

5.3 How do correctional employees see and treat you as an incarcerated person registered for the NSC examination? (Probe: Are they supportive and helpful, and if so, how? If not, what are their perceptions of incarcerated youth studying for the NSC examination?)

Abasebenzi bezokuqondisa izigwegwe bakubona futhi bakuphatha kanjani njengomuntu oboshiwe obhalisele ukuhlolwa kwe-NSC? (Uphenyo: Ingabe basekela futhi bayasiza, futhi uma kunjalo, kanjani? Uma kungenjalo, yimiphi imibono yabo ngentsha eboshiwe efundela ukuhlolwa kwe-NSC?)

5.4 Have you experienced any stigmatization due to your incarcerated status, and how has it affected your educational experiences?

Usuke wabhekana nanoma yikuphi ukucwaswa ngenxa yesimo sakho sokuboshwa, futhi kuye kwakuthinta kanjani okuhlangenwe nakho kwakho kwezemfundo?

5.5 Describe your experience of gaining access to study for the National Senior Certificate examination. Probe: Were there any specific challenges or barriers to accessing and participating in the educational programmes provided here? If yes: How did you overcome them?)

Chaza isipiliyoni sakho sokuthola ukufinyelela esifundweni sokuhlolwa kweSitifiketi Esiphezulu Sikazwelonke. Uphenyo: Ingabe zikhona izinselelo ezithile noma izithiyo zokufinyelela nokubamba iqhaza ezinhlelweni zemfundo ezinikezwe lapha? Uma yebo: Wabanqoba kanjani?)

5.6 How would you characterize the influence of your educational experiences while incarcerated on your general thinking and future goals?

Ungabonakalisa kanjani ithonya lokuhlangenwe nakho kwakho kwezemfundo ngenkathi uvalelwe ekucabangeni kwakho okujwayelekile nezinhloso zesikhathi esizayo?

6. Access to the Curriculum

6.1 How is the national curriculum offered for those registered for the NSC examination? (Probe: Is there a structured programme in which you participate? What subject choices are offered? Did you have a choice of what subjects you wished to study? If not, explain. If yes, did you receive guidance in relation to choosing your subjects? Explain.)

Uhlelo lwezifundo lukazwelonke lunikezwa kanjani kulabo ababhalisele ukuhlolwa kwe-NSC? (Uphenyo: Ingabe lukhona uhlelo oluhlelekile lapho ubamba iqhaza khona? Yikuphi ukukhetha isihloko okunikezwayo? Waba nokukhetha ukuthi yiziphi izifundo ofisa ukuzifunda? Uma kungenjalo, chaza. Uma yebo, ingabe wathola isiqondiso maqondana nokukhetha izifundo zakho? Chaza.)

6.2 What resources are available to support the participation of youth like yourself registered for the NSC examination? (Probe: What resources do you think should be provided for successful participation in the national curriculum?)

Yiziphi izinsiza ezikhona zokusekela iqhaza lentsha efana nawe ebhalisele ukuhlolwa kwe-NSC? (Uphenyo: Yiziphi izinsiza ocabanga ukuthi kufanele zinikezwe iqhaza eliphumelelayo ohlelweni lwezifundo lukazwelonke?)

7. **Teaching, Learning & Assessment**

7.1 How did your educational experiences prior to incarceration influence your approach to studying while incarcerated?

Okuhlangenwe nakho kwakho kwezemfundo ngaphambi kokuboshwa kwathonya kanjani indlela yakho yokufunda ngenkathi uboshiwe?

7.2 Describe the environment in which teaching and learning occurs in a correctional setting. Probe: What are your views of the teaching and learning environment? Is it suitable for learning and teaching? Explain you answer. Are learning and teaching materials available? Explain.

Chaza indawo lapho ukufundisa nokufunda kwenzeka khona esimweni sokuqondisa izigwegwe. Uphenyo: Yimiphi imibono yakho ngendawo yokufundisa nokufunda? Ingabe kufanelekile ukufunda nokufundisa? Chaza ukuthi uphendula. Ingabe izinto zokufunda nokufundisa ziyatholakala? Chaza.

7.3 Who are teachers on the programme? (Probe: Are there any other personnel, such as mentors or tutors available to support you? How would you describe your relationship with your teachers? If you do have access to mentors or tutors, describe your relationship with them? How has your interaction with teachers differed from your previous educational experiences outside of incarceration? Explain.)

Obani othisha ohlelweni? (Uphenyo: Bakhona yini abanye abasebenzi, njengaluleki noma abafundisi abakhona ukukusekela? Ungabuchaza kanjani ubuhlobo bakho nabafundisi bakho? Uma ngabe uyakwazi ukufinyelela kubaluleki noma abafundisi, chaza ubuhlobo bakho nabo? Ukusebenzisana kwakho nothisha kuhluke kanjani ekuhlangenwe nakho kwakho kwezemfundo kwangaphambilini ngaphandle kokuboshwa? Chaza.)

7.4 How would you describe your experience of teaching and learning? (Probe: Does teaching occur face to face or online? What common pedagogical (i.e. teaching & learning) approaches do teacher use? How would you describe your experience of the teaching methods your teachers use? Are their approaches to teaching and learning inclusive? Do

you feel comfortable and included in the classroom? Explain. Do you feel safe approaching them for help and support when you face learning difficulties, i.e. barriers to learning? Explain)

Ungakuchaza kanjani okuhlangenwe nakho kwakho kokufundisa nokufunda? (Uphenyo: Ingabe ukufundisa kwenzeka ubuso nobuso noma ku-intanethi? Yiziphi izindlela ezivamile ze-pedagogical (okungukuthi ukufundisa nokufunda) ezisetshenziswa othisha? Ungakuchaza kanjani okuhlangenwe nakho kwakho kwezindlela zokufundisa othisha bakho abazisebenzisayo? Ingabe izindlela zabo zokufundisa nokufunda zibandakanya? Ingabe uzizwa ukhululekile futhi ufakiwe ekilasini? Chaza. Ingabe uzizwa uphephile ukusondela kubo ukuze uthole usizo nokusekelwa lapho ubhekene nobunzima bokufunda, okusho izithiyo zokufunda? Chaza)

7.5 What key factors influence your academic participation and achievements? (Probe: How would you describe your participation in your studies? How are you performance in your studies? Do you think you're doing well in classes? If so, what are the indicators? If not, what would enable your successful participation in your studies?

Yiziphi izinto ezisemqoka ezithinta iqhaza lakho lezemfundo kanye nempumelelo? (Uphenyo: Ungakuchaza kanjani ukubamba kwakho iqhaza ezifundweni zakho? Ukusebenza kanjani ezifundweni zakho? Ucabanga ukuthi wenza kahle emakilasini? Uma kunjalo, yiziphi izinkomba? Uma kungenjalo, yini engenza iqhaza lakho liphumelele ezifundweni zakho?

7.6 Do you interact with other inmates currently studying for the NSC examination? (Probe: If so, how would you describe your relationship with them? Are there opportunities for you to work together and support each other in your studies? Explain.)

Usebenzisana nezinye iziboshwa njengamanje ezifundela ukuhlolwa kwe-NSC? (Uphenyo: Uma kunjalo, ungabuchaza kanjani ubuhlobo bakho nabo? Akhona yini amathuba ukuthi nisebenzisane futhi nisekelane ezifundweni zenu? Chaza.)

7.7 What is your experience of assessment in this programme? (Probe: what forms of assessment have you experienced thus far? What forms of support are available to prepare for assessments as well as the final examination? Are there any modifications in the assessments which consider barriers to learning like a disability or the context of taking tests and exams in the prison context? Explain.)

Yini okuhlangenwe nakho kwakho kokuhlola kulolu hlelo? (Uphenyo: yiziphi izinhlobo zokuhlola ohlangabezane nazo kuze kube manje? Yiziphi izinhlobo zokusekela ezikhona ukulungiselela ukuhlolwa kanye nokuhlolwa kokugcina? Ingabe kukhona ukuguqulwa ekuhlolweni okucabangela izithiyo zokufunda njengokukhubazeka noma umongo wokuthatha izivivinyo nezivivinyo esimweni sejele? Chaza.)

Appendix H: Letter: Psychological Services for Participants

Gift of the Givers
FOUNDATION

22 April 2024

To Whom It May Concern,

I, Zohra Ismail Sooliman, am writing this letter to confirm that I am willing and available to provide psychological support and intervention to any participants involved in the research project titled *"An Investigation of the Educational Experiences of Incarcerated Youth Registered for the National Senior Certificate Examination in a Prison of KwaZulu-Natal,"* conducted by Mr. Ntuthuko Mathenjwa, a Master of Education student at the University of KwaZulu-Natal, Pietermaritzburg Campus.

Should any of the research participants encounter psychological challenges during the course of the study, I am committed to offering my professional assistance to ensure their well-being and psychological safety. I would appreciate if these appointments could be set up in advance by the student or yourself. Please use this e mail address for this purpose.

Please feel free to contact me if you require any further information or clarification regarding my role in this research project.

Sincerely,

Zohra Ismail Sooliman

Counselling Psychologist

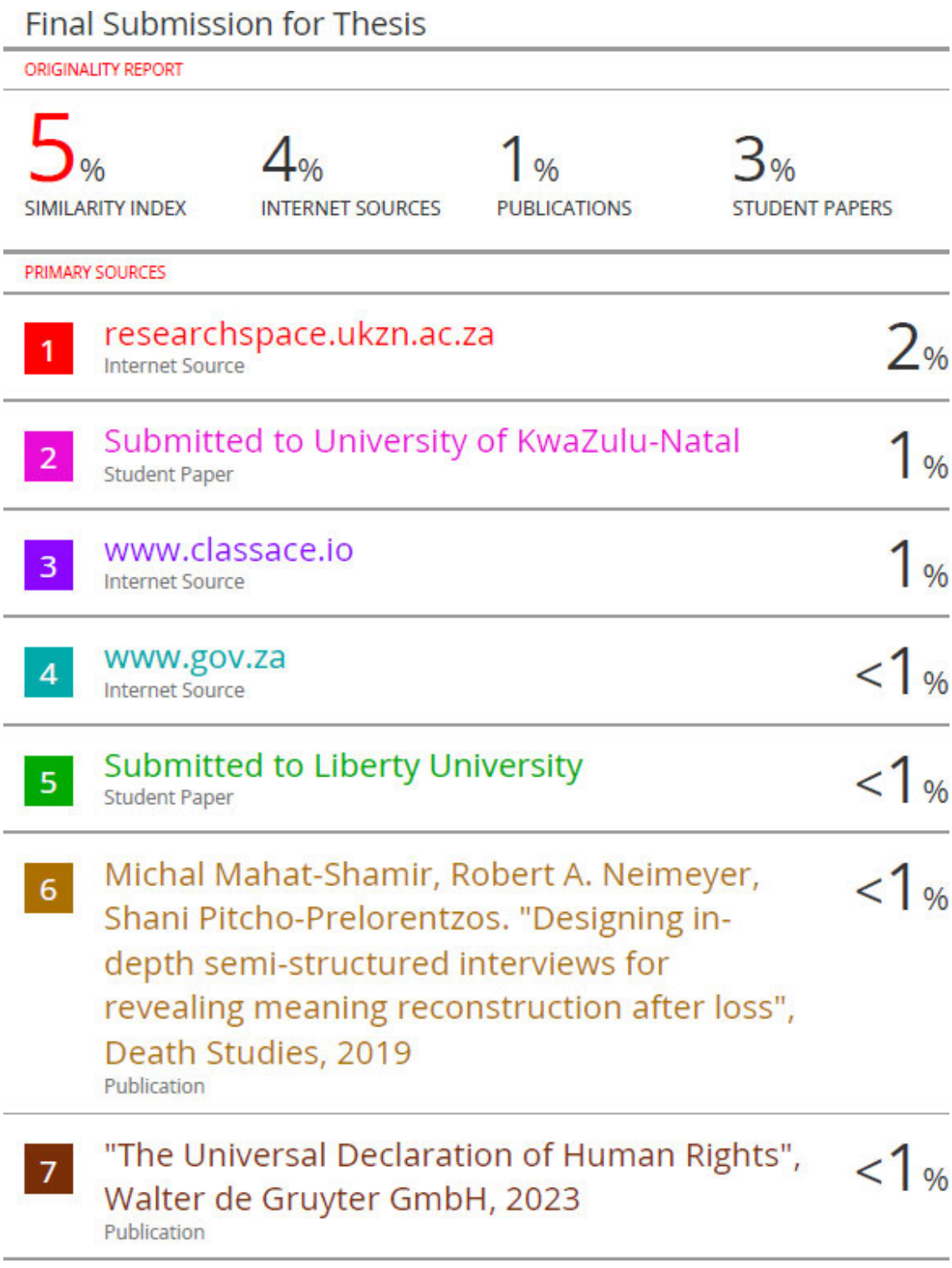
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Appendix I: Originality Report



Final Submission for Thesis

ORIGINALITY REPORT

5%	4%	1%	3%
SIMILARITY INDEX	INTERNET SOURCES	PUBLICATIONS	STUDENT PAPERS

PRIMARY SOURCES

1	researchspace.ukzn.ac.za Internet Source	2%
2	Submitted to University of KwaZulu-Natal Student Paper	1%
3	www.classace.io Internet Source	1%
4	www.gov.za Internet Source	<1%
5	Submitted to Liberty University Student Paper	<1%
6	Michal Mahat-Shamir, Robert A. Neimeyer, Shani Pitcho-Prelorentzos. "Designing in-depth semi-structured interviews for revealing meaning reconstruction after loss", Death Studies, 2019 Publication	<1%
7	"The Universal Declaration of Human Rights", Walter de Gruyter GmbH, 2023 Publication	<1%

Appendix J: Certificate from Language Editor

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Date: 15 January 2026

CERTIFICATE OF LANGUAGE EDITING

TO WHOM IT MAY CONCERN

This is to certify that the thesis bearing the provisional title *an exploration of educational experiences of incarcerated youth registered for the National Senior Certificate examinations in a correctional centre in the province of KwaZulu-Natal*, to be submitted by **Ntuthuko Sibonelo Mathenjwa** has been edited for language correctness and spelling, consistency, coherence, and completeness of the list of references and cited authors, by Ntwintwi Proofreading and Editing Solutions. Neither the research content and substance nor the author's intentions were altered in any way during the editing process.

Ntwintwi guarantees the quality of English language in this thesis, provided our editor's changes are accepted and further changes made to the thesis are checked by our editor.

Yours sincerely,



JABULANI NGCOBO

NTWINTWI PROOFREADING AND EDITING SOLUTIONS