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CORRECTIONAL EDUCATION, REHABILITATION AND REINTEGRATION: A QUALITATIVE SURVEY OF YOUNG EX-CONVICTS IN MAKURDI, BENUE STATE, NIGERIA

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Abstract
Transiting from Prison or correctional walls to the community poses serious challenges to released convicts because there are fear and shame during and after the jail term. Most particularly, these released convicts often lack the knowledge and skills needed or required to function effectively in society. This study thus sets out to investigate how the opportunities provided by education while in prison helps young convicts to reform (rehabilitate) and subsequently reintegrate in the society. Through qualitative research approach, the study held discussions (Focus Group Discussions-FGDs) with 24 young ex-convicts of 20 to 35 years in Makurdi town with discussants divided into two groups of 12 members each. Thematic analysis was adopted in analysing data from the discussion sessions. The study found that educating convicts aids significantly in rehabilitation (reformation) and also provides self-effective skills that aid their successful reintegration into society. Also, education programmes centered on mental health and counselling help improve the mental well-being and confidence in the young ex-convicts. The study recommends a well-coordinated and comprehensive education in the prison particularly for young convicts. This is conceived to help facilitate learning, skills acquisition, rehabilitation and subsequent reintegration of released young convicts into society.

Keywords: Rehabilitation; Recidivism; Reintegration; Convicts.

Introduction

Correctional education has emerged globally as a vital mechanism for supporting the reformation and reintegration of post incarcerated young people into society. In countries such as Denmark and Belgium, access to high-quality post-secondary education within correctional facilities is regarded as essential for facilitating a smooth transition from confinement to societal engagement (UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning, 2021). Beyond academic instruction, correctional education programmes aim to foster civic responsibility, equipping young convicts with the skills and values necessary to contribute meaningfully to their lives and to their communities upon release (Chikadzi, Chanakira & Mbululu, 2022). Despite substantial investment in correctional education globally, challenges persist. Previous studies reveal persistent issues of truancy, absenteeism, and disengagement among young convicts, even where educational opportunities are provided (Heney, 2022). These problems raise questions about the effectiveness of correctional education in achieving its intended outcomes such as reformation.

The reformation of convicts implies a crucial aspect of the criminal justice system, aiming specifically to transform or change convicts into law-abiding citizens of society focusing on rehabilitation,

education, and skills development to equip convicts for reintegration into society. This is done, among other things, by education and skills training providing access to formal education, vocational training and apprenticeships to enhance employability and hitherto reintegration (Inimiesi, 2025).

Reintegration refers to re-entry of released inmates into harmonious interactions with others in society. The term likewise uses the prefix "re", suggesting that inmates had been integrated into society prior to their incarceration. However, this suggestion has been a subject of several debates, with prominent references to the fact that prior to imprisonment, many prisoners, for various reasons, have never been "integrated" into society, facing barriers such as poor housing, unemployment, drug addiction, health issues and debt burdens (Okunola, & Ekanem, 2020), and, upon their release at imprisonment, seldom can they count on sound social structures. Like rehabilitation, reintegration is also not used in a uniform way in literature.

In South Africa, for example, the government prioritizes youth development as a policy since the country's democratic transition in 1994, yet many young people continue to face socioeconomic hard-ships that increase their risk of incarceration (Chikadzi, Chanakira & Mbululu, 2022). Factors such as lack of parental support, association with deviant peers, and gang involvement contribute significantly to youth crime (Chauke & Malatji, 2021). Although the South African legislative framework including the 2004 White Paper on corrections emphasizes rehabilitation through education, young ex-convicts often struggle with reintegration into mainstream society. (Hadebe, 2021).

Correctional education has a positive and holistic impact on young ex-convicts, which is essential for successful social and community reintegration. Studies emphasize that by addressing cognitive, emotional, and practical skills development, correctional education supports a smoother transition from incarceration to community life. In the South African context therefore, researchers highlight the role of correctional education programmes in contributing to the economic development of young ex-convicts. They argue that equipping ex-convicts with vocational and entrepreneurial skills significantly enhances their employability and economic independence, thereby facilitating their reintegration into society and reducing recidivism (Roessger, Liang, Weese, & Parker, 2021; Wallace & Wang, 2020; Agan & Starr, 2018).

In Nigeria, a study by (Oba, 2025) indicates that as a custodial institution, the prison is responsible for deterring potential criminals by imposing penalties, detaining individuals awaiting trial for alleged crimes, or incarcerating those who have been found guilty and sentenced. Additionally, it provides rehabilitative programmes, such as education, vocational training, and counselling, to address the root cause of criminal behaviour. The Nigerian Correctional Services' primary mandate is to ensure the safe custody of those who have been legally convicted, as well as to ensure they are reformed, rehabilitated, and effectively reintegrated into society (Okunola, & Ekanem, 2020), by providing them with support, putting them in touch with the resources they need, and working with outside stakeholders. It is responsible for encouraging positive behavioural changes in prisoners and preparing them for a smooth transition back into society.

Despite the potential aims of the Nigerian Prison Service and large investments in rehabilitation services, their efficacy in decreasing criminal conduct remains uncertain (Olabamiji, 2025; Oba, 2025).

Upon release, ex-inmates encounter a society suspicious of their reform: background checks block employment, families struggle with stigma-induced alienation, and halfway homes or organized re-entry help are essentially non-existent (Olabamiji, 2025). Many inevitably return to crime, seeking acceptability and a living in illegal networks that the legitimate economy does not provide.

Only three (3) of every ten (10) Nigerians who are remanded in jail often emerge completely rehabilitated, according to a United Nations assessment (Olabamiji, 2025). Although rehabilitation programmes like literacy classes, vocational workshops, and psychosocial counselling largely exist on paper due to chronic underfunding, a lack of qualified instructors, and unstable supply chains. Correctional personnel, who are frequently selected on short rotations from other commands, deal with low morale, little opportunity for professional advancement, and insufficient security equipment—all of which encourage corruption within the services (Ashibi, & Adams, 2023).

After being released from prison, young ex-convicts face Nigeria's precarious economy, high rates of young unemployment, and loss of livelihood due to imprisonment. These conditions, together with widespread stigma, increase the risk of reoffending.

This study was undertaken in Makurdi town of Benue state, Nigeria which houses one of the three correctional centres in Benue state. Makurdi has a good population of young ex-convicts who are believed to be in a quest for reintegration.

Correctional education in Makurdi in particular and Nigeria at large is essential to incarcerated individuals with the aim of promoting rehabilitation, skill development, and successful reintegration into society. Programmes typical to these include basic literacy education, vocational skills training, counselling, and social skills development. Correctional education in Nigeria seeks to address the social and economic vulnerabilities that predispose young people to criminality. Ideally, the correctional education programme is implemented under adult basic education and training (ABET), which covers a combination of primary education and secondary education, which includes Grades 11 and 12 and focuses on life skills, occupational and entrepreneurial skills training, and computer-based training; and tertiary education, which focuses on post-secondary educational programmes. However, the participants in this study were involved in the combined education category of correctional education while incarcerating in the correctional facility in Makurdi. Matulis, (2024) and Oba, (2025) argue that despite the positive impact correctional education has on convicts, the programmes have been suffering due to a variety of challenges, including poor investment from the government in both capital and human resources. In addition, Mafilika, & Marongwe, (2024) are of the view that the unprofessional conduct of correctional services staff towards education of convicts further thwarts the effectiveness of these programmes.

This study's universe is young ex-convicts who participated in correctional education and social skills development programmes while incarcerated. It explored whether these educational interventions contributed meaningfully to the participants post incarceration, and particularly reintegration into society, within the unique socio-economic environment of Makurdi town.

Existing research has largely focused on the financial implications and policy frame-works of correctional education (Tonseth, Bergsland, & Hui, 2019; Berghui, 2018). This study has paid specific attention to the life experiences and perspectives of young ex-convicts themselves and whether the educational opportunities provided within correctional services meaningfully facilitate successful rehabilitation and reintegration into society by these young ex-convicts, because there is believed to exist a gap, particularly in Makurdi, in understanding whether the education provided within the correctional facility effectively supports successful rehabilitation and subsequent reintegration of young convicts after release. This study addresses that gap by exploring the narratives of young ex-convicts, aged 20 to 35 years, regarding their experiences with correctional education and its impact on their rehabilitation and reintegration into society. This research aims to develop a responsive

pedagogical framework for correctional education, contributing to both theory and practice in the rehabilitation and reintegration of young convicts.

Correctional education is critical in the context of a developing nation like Nigeria because it teaches crucial skills to convicts, allowing them to improve their chances of reintegration into society (Ravele, 2022). According to a study conducted in London, participation in correctional education fosters a significant increase in self-confidence and self-esteem among young convicts, providing for them to engage in additional educational pursuits and, as a result improving their employability prospects (Couloute, & Kopf, 2018).

Furthermore, Honorato (2022) observes that correctional education improves the awareness of young convicts' ethical inventiveness, receptivity and societal participation. As a result, these people have a higher chance of successfully reintegrating into society by taking an active role in social activities. In Zambia, young people in correctional services receive vocational literacy training through correctional education, preparing them to lead productive lives after they are released (Kakupaa & Mulenga, 2021; Berghuis, 2018; English, 2018)).

Participation in educational programmes while incarcerated provides young convicts with a feeling of purpose, acting as a deterrent to recidivism upon release (Miner-Romanoff, 2016; Haimson, 2022).

According to Chen, and Rine-Reesha (2022), the focus of correctional education is employment-oriented, helping young ex-convicts to access dignified vocations following release. Correctional education's vocational training enables young ex-convicts to achieve independence and self-sufficiency. A related study by Farrington (2020) highlights the critical importance of correctional education in preparing convicts for entrepreneurial ventures upon release, giving them the set of skills needed to start on their own.

Correctional education provides ex-convicts, specifically the young ones, with the skills needed to resist the attractions to crime, easing their re-entry into society in quest for reintegration. Those who participate in educational programmes while incarcerated use the knowledge gained to pursue further educational attainments, thereby improving their employability (Heney, 2022).

Ward and Stewart's Good Lives Model Theory, developed in 2003, is adopted for this study to provide the theoretical framework showing the relationship between correctional education and positive societal reintegration. This theory proposes a strengths-based approach to rehabilitation, arguing that individuals have basic primary human needs that must be met for them to live pro-social lives. Failure to achieve these basic needs or facing substantial life obstacles increases the likelihood of engaging in criminal behaviour.

In addition, the Good Lives Model Theory advocates for educational opportunities within correctional services, posits that such interventions are critical in preventing post-release recidivating. These educational efforts are intended to contribute significantly to convicts' personal, social and economic progress, hence helping them achieve the acquisition of essential human goods (Ward & Brown 2004)

The Good Lives Model (GLM) also is of the position that correctional education programmes should equip convicts with the necessary skills and knowledge to fulfil their fundamental human needs and reintegrate meaningfully into mainstream society.

This study is therefore necessary to provide more understanding of the lives of young ex-convicts after incarceration. The study will help the community understand its role in the ex-convicts through providing education for those incarcerated as they reform and as well achieve successful re-entry

without returning to crime or recidivation. The study is also important to address government agencies like those concerned with education and employment to create programmes consistent with young ex-convicts and their attempts to maintain crime free lifestyles.

Study Questions

The study, in its attempt to put together a narrative of the experiences of young ex-convicts in their education, rehabilitation and re-integration, aim to answer the following questions:

i. What are the correctional education programmes existent in the Makurdi correctional center?
ii. How does correctional education of convicts impact the rehabilitation and re-integration of young ex-convicts in Makurdi community?

Study Objectives

The general objective of the study is to put together the narratives of young ex-convicts in their correctional education, rehabilitation and re-integration into Makurdi community. Particularly, however, the study has the ensuing objectives:

i. To determine the experiences as narrated by the young ex-convicts of their correctional education, rehabilitation and re-integration into Makurdi community.
ii. To determine how correctional education impacts the rehabilitation and reintegration of young ex-convicts in Makurdi community.

Methods and Material

This study used a qualitative research approach within the interpretivism paradigm to investigate whether young ex-convicts' educational experiences in correctional service truly facilitated their successful transition from incarceration to reintegration into society. Ormston, Spencer, Barnard, and Snape, (2014) defined the qualitative approach as a methodological position generally adopted by social scientists with the objective of generating complete and complex insights from people within their unique social contexts. This form of inquiry was particularly advantageous due to the participants' unique perspectives on specific occurrences, providing a strong avenue for the discovery of profound insights. Given the objectives of this study, the qualitative approach formed an excellent choice as it allowed for the collection of diverse viewpoints from young people with a history of involvement in criminal activities, have been convicted and are released. The adoption of the interpretive paradigm was of critical importance in the study.

Population and Sampling

For this study, the population consisted of twenty-four (24) young ex-convicts aged 20 to 35 who had previously been convicted, participated in correctional education while confined in the Makurdi correctional centre, and have been released and are based in Makurdi, Benue state, Nigeria. From the 24 participants under study, eight spent six years, nine had spent eight years, and seven had spent nine years in incarceration for various criminal offences. At the time of the study, 11 participants had been released for four years, seven had been released for approximately six years, and six released for three years prior to participating in the research. The sample size of 24 young ex-convicts was determined by purposive and snowball sampling. These young ex-convicts had participated in correctional education as part of their rehabilitation programmes. Purposive sampling was used to select individuals based on their ease of access, allowing the researcher to make sound judgments when selecting

participants who matched the essential requirements. Using snowball sampling, Makurdi correctional public relations department referred the researcher to other individuals who met the criteria for participation in the study. To be eligible for the study, individuals had to be between the ages of 20 and 35, live in Makurdi and have previously been incarcerated and engaged in correctional education at the correctional service and are released.

Data Collection

The Focus Group Discussion (FGDs) method was utilized to collect data through a series of discussion topics to comprehend the participants' experiences with the subject under review. This data collection strategy was critical because it enabled the researcher to carefully listen to the participants, record their views, listen to the recordings and compare with the written testaments by the researcher of the participants. The group discussions were repeated after one month to be certain the participants were of the same views on the subject matter. The FGDs were anchored on themes such as;

- Reckon with correctional education and its effect on personal development and social reformation of young ex-convicts for transition and reintegration into society
- Alignment of educational programmes in correctional facilities with the needs and aspirations of incarcerated individuals for post-release success.
- Relationship between participation in educational programmes during incarceration and the self-efficacy and confidence in pursuing crime free life styles.
- Post-release support systems and opportunities such as job placement services, mentoring programmes as complements of the educational programmes in facilitating successful reintegration.

Data Analysis

For phenomenological qualitative research such as this one, the study utilized the thematic analysis to organize the data collected. Thematic analysis involves a close examination of the data collected to identify and come out with common themes-recurring topics and ideas (Chikadzi, Chanakira, & Mbululu, 2022). The study thus adapted the six steps developed by Braun and Clarke (2006) in treatment of the data collected for this study.

The six steps are as follows:

Step 1. *Familiarizing*- the study gathered participants responses, transcribed audio files, and analysed them for significant patterns within the data set.

Step 2. *Coding*- here specific texts were identified and highlighted thereby forming codes to describe the content. These codes provided concise summaries of the main points and recurring themes.

Step 3. *Generating themes*-the study reviewed the codes to identify patterns and then developed themes based on these patterns.

Step 4. *Reviewing themes*-the study ensured that the formulated themes were useful and represented the subject matter with good degree of accuracy.

Step 5. *Defining and naming themes*-each theme was carefully defined and the study dedicated time to understand what each theme represented and how it contributed to understanding the data collected.

Step 6. *Penning down (writing up)*-the study wrote out a thematic analysis, beginning with an introduction describing the research questions, research objectives, and methodology. The study finally described the main points and demonstrated how the analysis addressed the research questions.

Ethical Consideration

The study ensured that the character of the participants was kept confidential. All information as data was obtained through informed consent of the participants and the discussions were conducted without coercion. The participants were allowed to choose freely to participate and the freedom to comment or decline from commenting where they felt discomfort.

Results and Discussion of Findings

The study explored the experiences of the young ex-convicts and whether the educational opportunities provided in prison really help young ex-convicts to make a successful transition back into society. The themes and sub-themes identified in this study are presented below and supported with quotes to support the participants' claims.

Personal Development

The predominant theme that emerged from this study was personal development which is birthed from the FGDs core theme on reckoning with correctional education and its effect on personal development and social reformation of young ex-convicts for transition and reintegration into society

The result revealed from the groups' sessions 'A' and 'B' that young people with a history of crime and criminality had experienced positive out-comes from the correctional education programmes provided within correctional service in Makurdi. Moreover, eighteen out of the twenty-four participants from FGDs revealed that participation in correctional education had contributed to the enhanced personal development of their individual lives. Six participants said they were not interested initially but for the interest shown by others, they also participated in correctional education.

Twelve participants from the eighteen however posited that most members of the community still consider them as misfits to society, thus reintegrating fully is still a problem. "*Despite education, people still find it difficult to trust some of us with a criminal record. In search for jobs, several employers rejected employing persons with criminal backgrounds of convictions. Thanks to education as self-help has moved some of us closer to society and away from despise*." Six of them who took part in the correctional education programme said they are fully settled down and looking forward to greater involvement with social responsibilities. The six participants who said they were not interested in correctional education initially said "*with correctional education while incarcerating and with help from family and friends we have been adequately provided for and are able to earn for a living and aim to forge a life accepted by immediate members of the community*."

Solutions to socio-economic needs and aspirations

This theme evolved from the FGDs second main theme of alignment of educational programmes in correctional facilities with the needs and aspirations of incarcerated individuals for post-release success. Within this overarching theme, several sub-themes were identified, including promotion of mental health and well-being, and self-efficacy. The participants who confirmed their participation in the educational programme while in incarceration all affirmed that education has helped them have more positive and progressive considerations on their lives. Nineteen of the twenty-four participants that were educated in prison also said that they are "*very excited leaving incarceration and to be back to family and the general freshness that comes with the feeling of freedom. They were optimistic that they will be able to re-integrate successfully given the optimism from education and with expectations of support and encouragement from family and friends. That they have been lucky enough to receive*

education which places them on better grounds at attaining set standards of the society". One of the nineteen said "*I had higher diploma certificate in electrical and electronics before incarceration and the education in prison on entrepreneurial growth and management has given knowledge on how to set up and manage my business and am willing to mentor other young people who may have travelled the path of incarceration. Some people don't trust that I can actually provide services to them without issues of misconduct. Someone said even if am the best at electrical works he would rather get such services from someone else; he doesn't want problems. I am however bent on proving that am better, character wise, and hope to have acceptability for the community*".

The six who said they were not willing to take part in correctional education initially posited that their lives are a lot better complimented by the other programmes aimed at reformation; "*the carpentry training we received has helped us since people in the community see us as trustworthy and can to some extent enter into some form of business with us. One said he is lucky to be receiving unwavering support from family; we operate a food items business in the family and I have been given an opportunity to live again. Capital was given to me to start for myself a small outlet which am running successfully. I can say that am lucky*".

Being financially incompetent can alter one's life. Earning money is necessary for everyone. Although these young ex-convicts would want to be as productive as they can during their re-integration, being uneducated and unable to find a source of earning could make them struggle to survive and probably lead to recidivation. If they do not find an employer for a long time, despite the skills they have developed in their reformation, they may resort to recidivation. Ex-convicts have the same struggle as others for finding a job after release from jail in order to earn a living. They would most likely start from scratch since their degree of employability is very low. A lot of patience is required in starting from scratch, impatience will likely take an ex-convict back to prison for repeat crime (Yin, Boateng, & Kofie, 2022).

In Nigeria, a convict can hardly be employed by government; cannot contest elections to be voted into any public office, except given some form of pardon. Most often the ex-convicts' resort to selling something to sustain their daily needs.

Members from groups 'A' and 'B' who received education in prison said before prison, they were people who easily got angry and took out their stress and frustrations to stealing and violence. But, after attending and completing the correctional education programme in the correctional service they started to learn the importance of controlling anger and managing stress.

The participants narrated that they were able to reintegrate into mainstream society because the education they received has reformed and taught them the importance of self-forgiveness as a prerequisite for societal forgiveness and acceptance. Being in correctional service led them to develop anxiety about what life would be like at release but, attending a number of counselling sessions that address mental health, and psychological well-being helped deal with anxiety. That, as much as they need basic literacy and vocational training while in prison, they are also glad for the correctional educational programmes that addressed psychological and emotional well-being. "*Through the educational programmes that look at our mental health, we were better prepared to face the world outside the walls of incarceration*.

The statements above unveil the importance of comprehensive correctional education that goes beyond basic literacy and vocational training. By incorporating mental health support and counselling services, these programmes contribute to the overall well-being of young ex-convicts, thereby enhancing their

ability to adapt and thrive upon re-entry into society (Bebbington, McManus, Coid, Garside, and Brugha, 2021).

Post release and reintegration

Adverse and resentful treatment from the members of society will always be part of the everyday problems of ex-convicts in their struggle as they re-integrate back to society. The treatment from both family and society on young ex-convicts affects them significantly. If the treatment is pleasant and humane, it will heal and favour them. However, if it is not, as mostly is the case, it can be bad for them. However, the magnitude of resentment from the society and family members towards ex-convicts, particularly young ex-convicts is greatly reduced by education while incarcerating. The participants who received education in prison said "*it is like all eyes are on us in our re-integration struggle*". But it is clear that they are given better opportunities and room as compared to other young ex-convicts who are not educated. They believe this is because their reasoning and views about life are approved by people they come in contact with. The participants further said they are fast gaining the trust of the people around them and will achieve greater acceptability due to how well they are conducting themselves-a good number (18) of them had found jobs with private firms (seven at RanTITO Diaries, six with Dexters fast food, and five with SUDOPEE super market, all in Makurdi). The others said they have begun small businesses and are getting their economic and social lives back on track.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Crime and incarceration are global challenges that require global attention at making the community and the world a better place. This could be done through educating convicts in order to better their lives after release, on the consequences of repeat crime and on how to live a crime free life style.

From the foregoing analysis and findings therefore, it is succinct to say that reformation and re-integration of ex-convicts into the community are difficult tasks made easy by providing correctional education. The society that helps put them away is not fully prepared for their return and not willingly ready to accept the return of the ex-convicts. Young ex-convicts have greater chances with reintegration on receiving correctional education. This is to say that education of young convicts places them on a good footing to go on with life as they contribute meaningfully to the community after release.

Flowing from the above therefore, the following recommendations are made;

1. The department of labour and employment of Benue state could develop employment opportunities and job assistance programmes where young ex-convicts are target beneficiaries in order to help sustain their daily needs as they re-integrate fully.
2. The community should assist the young ex-convicts by accepting them and providing moral support. Their re-integration efforts should be encouraged by patronizing the self-help businesses set up by these returning members. This could remove stigma and the feeling of resentment and cut down recidivism.
3. The private sector employers should be willing to give young ex-convicts a chance at earning for a living. Employers should be open minded and look beyond the criminal records of the ex-convicts to the future.
4. The Benue state government could make inputs in the correction and reformation process by providing agriculture-based education and opportunities to inmates preparatory for their release date, albeit corrections as federal government-controlled institution.

5. Makurdi community should provide opportunities and assistance for young ex-convicts and would be ex-convicts. This will help re-integration of ex-convicts.

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