Correctional educators' experiences of professional development in a South African prison school

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Abstract

Both local and international research converge on the finding that correctional educators (CEs) are key in the rehabilitation of incarcerated students. Nevertheless, a gap remains in understanding how CEs' experiences affect their pedagogy and professional identity within the correctional environment. To address this gap, this study investigated the experiences of CEs and how teaching at a South African correctional facility influenced their pedagogy and professional identity. A phenomenological research design, embedded in the qualitative research approach and grounded in the Professional Identity Formation (PIF) framework, was adopted using an interpretivist approach. Purposive sampling was employed to recruit 11 participants, and data were collected through semi-structured interviews and analyzed thematically. The findings revealed an ageing workforce with substantial teaching experience, often transitioning from mainstream to correctional education, suggesting a strong emotional connection to the teaching profession. Despite numerous challenges, including a shortage of CEs and teaching resources, and a lack of sustainable professional development opportunities, CEs expressed a strong desire for continuous professional learning and institutional support in pursuit of their professional growth and empowerment. This study contributes to the scholarship of prison education by identifying challenges affecting the professional development of CEs while also offering recommendations to enhance their professional effectiveness and the responsiveness of the institutional support they yearn for, such as the allocation of adequate resources and investment in ongoing professional development.

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1. Introduction

Education is about social justice and inclusivity. Yet, as education becomes increasingly globalized, few studies acknowledge the role of correctional educators (CEs) as gatekeepers of prison education, including how CEs' pedagogical experiences affect their professional identity (Borbon et al., 2025; Felix, 2019; Moyo et al., 2022). This paper focused on the experiences of CEs who teach at a South African male prison school and explored how teaching in a correctional school influenced their professional identity.

According to Borbon et al. (2025), a teacher's professional identity is shaped by their self-perception as an educator and their understanding of their role and impact on the community. Moorhead et al. (2025) note that professional identity is an enduring, yet multidimensional feature of our professional lives, encompassing multiple social identities developed through a process of socialization into a profession. From this perspective, an educator's professional identity, how they perceive themselves and their societal role, serves as the psychological foundation for effective teaching practice and can be maintained through several dimensions that involve affect and a sense of belonging to a profession (Borbon et al., 2025; Zhang & Wang, 2018). Based on this, Felix (2019) maintains that in a democratic society such as South Africa, it is important to understand the professional identities of teachers.

Despite the ubiquitous research on professional development (Borbon et al., 2025; Felix, 2019; Karaolis & Philippou, 2019; Moorhead et al., 2025), there is little understanding of how teachers' professional identities are developed and maintained (Lojdová et al., 2021; Steele & Leming, 2022), specifically in a correctional school. Given the changing landscape of higher education in the 21st century (Mdakane et al., 2022), education is embracing innovative paradigm shifts requiring teachers to find ways to learn and accommodate the increasingly diverse and cosmopolitan student populations (Collinson et al., 2009). Towards this end, little professional development appears to be provided to help educators mitigate the stress of coming to terms with a world increasingly comprised of cosmopolitan students.

Despite this situation, all educators are encouraged to continuously enhance their knowledge, upgrade their pedagogical skills, and pursue higher qualifications to keep up with diverse student populations (Collinson et al., 2009; Schrum, 1999). Accordingly, South Africa's National Policy Framework for Teacher Education and Development (NPFTED) (2006) underscores the importance of educators possessing both subject matter expertise and pedagogical proficiency. Likewise, the South African Council for Educators Act (Section 5(ii)

(bb) reinforces the importance of ongoing professional development as a core component of in-service training, aimed at enhancing educators' performance and capabilities (Department of Education, 2006). Mashiane-Nkabinde et al. (2023) argue that professional development has become the pulse of the teaching profession, ensuring that teachers move with the times by adapting to the changing trends and practices. Hence, across the world, schooling systems have ingrained the implementation of teacher professional development in their strategic plans and institutional budgets (Nkambule & Ngubane, 2024).

However, exceptions apply to the South African correctional education system, which somewhat operates differently from the mainstream schooling system. Evidence suggests that the challenges faced by prison educators are not thoroughly addressed in South African correctional education literature, which tends to concentrate more on the lived experiences of incarcerated students. Eide and Westrheim (2023) confirm that many studies focus on documenting the advantages of correctional education for incarcerated students, often overlooking the lived experiences and developmental needs of the educators. Borbon et al. (2025) further highlight the scarcity of studies examining the nuanced changes in teachers' self-perceptions, instructional practices, and the integration of global perspectives in their teaching, including how they attain and maintain a comprehensive learning environment that positively impacts them and their students. To this end, many studies contend that CEs understanding of the importance of their professional role remains underexplored (Eide & Westrheim, 2023); while others conclude that the specific impact on the professional identity and pedagogical approaches of CE have received less research attention (Lojdová et al., 2021; Steele & Leming, 2022). In view of these, the present study aims to answer the following research questions:

RQ1: In what ways do the teaching experiences of educators in a South African prison school inform their pedagogical practices and shape their professional identity?

RQ2: What challenges (if any) do correctional educators experience, and to what extent is institutional support, both by Unisa and the Department of Correctional Services (DCS) made available to correctional educators?

By examining CEs' experiences of professional development, this study contributes to the scholarship on prison education by revealing how the challenges they face influence their pedagogy and professional identity within the correctional environment.

2. Literature Review

The concept of professional identity (PI) is complex and varies significantly across disciplines, making it difficult to define uniformly (Karaolis & Philippou, 2019; Moorhead et al., 2025). Nonetheless, there is scholarly consensus that PI is both a product and a process. As a product, PI reflects the meanings teachers attach to themselves through the interaction of their personal and professional selves at a given point in time. As a process, it evolves through social interaction and the influence of external perceptions (Karaolis & Philippou, 2019). In this view, one's conception of himself/herself as a person is interwoven with how he/she acts as a professional. Within the context of education, PI is shaped through a teacher's sense of belonging within their occupational community (Moorhead et al., 2025), and this socialization is a lifelong process. It comprises continuous meaning-making experiences that contribute to the development and transformation of one's PI throughout their career. According to Marcelo (2009), professional growth does not occur simply with time but through a dynamic process of development. Teachers form a PI – which he terms the professional "I" – through various sub-identities that are linked to different contexts and roles they occupy. This identity forms the psychological foundation for effective teaching practice and alignment with institutional goals (Zhang & Wang, 2018). Additionally, this reinforces the notion that PI is socially constructed and multidimensional, shaped by diverse and evolving social roles (Moorhead et al., 2025). Conclusively, a teacher's PI is shaped by their self-perception as an educator and their understanding of their role and impact on the community (Borbon et al., 2025).

Teacher Professional Development (TPD) is defined by Postholm (2012, p. 405) as "teachers' learning: how they learn to learn and how they apply their knowledge in practice to support pupils' learning". Simply, it refers to how teachers learn and apply that learning in the classroom through an ongoing process wherein they develop themselves professionally via formal courses, self-reflection, and observing peers. Teacher learning is fundamentally linked to student achievement. Kennedy (2016) notes that the goal of TPD is to improve teaching quality in order to enhance student learning outcomes. Postholm (2012) and Collinson et al. (2009) stress the importance of teachers continuously updating their knowledge and practice to better serve their learners. However, Kennedy (2016) cautions that the effectiveness of professional development depends largely on teachers' motivation and willingness to change. This highlights the importance of aligning TPD with teachers' personal and professional identity formation (PIF). Marcelo (2009) further argues that successful TPD requires teachers

to be committed to ongoing learning and skill enhancement, underscoring the necessity of lifelong learning in the profession. In correctional education settings, this principle holds relevance. CEs play a crucial role in reshaping teaching and learning in prisons and must therefore stay current with subject knowledge and pedagogy (Schrum, 1999).

Lifelong learning equips educators to adapt, innovate, and transform learning environments. As Collinson et al. (2009) suggest, fostering teacher development contributes to creating a society of knowledge workers, capable of driving innovation in the 21st century. Despite research into international education and its influence on teaching practices, there remains a significant gap in understanding how these experiences specifically affect teachers' PI and pedagogy within the correctional environment (Lojdová et al., 2021; Steele & Leming, 2022). Scholars such as Eide and Westrheim (2023) highlight that while many studies focus on the benefits of correctional education for incarcerated students, far less attention is paid to the experiences and development of CEs themselves. Borbon et al. (2025) also point to limited research addressing changes in teachers' self-perceptions, instructional practices, and the integration of global perspectives in correctional settings.

The literature presents diverse insights into the age, gender, and professional backgrounds of CEs across various countries and prison settings. Studies suggest that most CEs fall within the mid-career age bracket. For instance, a study in Namibia found that most CEs were between 26 and 34 years old (Sinalumbu, 2007). On the other hand, Flores and Barahona-López (2021) reported a broader age range (23-58) in southern California, with most educators being in their 30s and 40s. However, other studies, such as those done by Moyo et al. (2022) and Rosmilawati and Suherman (2018), omitted specific age data, limiting comparability. Regarding gender, findings vary depending on the institutional setting. Some studies showed balanced gender representation, while others reflect skewed ratios influenced by whether the facility houses males, females, or youth offenders. Female dominance has been noted in juvenile correctional settings, as reported by Manzini (2015), Stamp (2020), and Flores and Barahona-López (2021). In contrast, gender parity was found in studies by Eide and Westrheim (2023) and Mkosi and Mahlangu (2015), both reporting a 50:50 split. In terms of qualifications, most CEs hold teaching qualifications, though their experience within correctional settings varies widely. Sinalumbu (2007) found that many had fewer than five years of experience, indicating a relatively novice cohort. Conversely, Mafilika and Marongwe (2024) reported a mix of new and old educators. Gearhart (2021) and Lukacova et al. (2018)

documented highly experienced educators with up to 20 years in corrections and 34 years in mainstream education. Research from South Africa indicates that many CEs transition from mainstream education without being adequately prepared for the prison environment. Studies by Mkosi and Mahlangu (2015) and Mafilika and Marongwe (2024) found that most educators had prior experience in the Department of Education (DoE) before joining the DCS.

Upon transitioning, CEs must contend with inadequate funding, poor management, and weak communication with DCS authorities (Flores & Barahona-López, 2021). Sinalumbu (2007) highlights issues such as limited financial support, a shortage of teaching materials, and insufficient training in Namibian facilities. These factors create discouraging and stressful teaching environments, where educators often lack the necessary training to manage classes effectively (Flores, 2012; 2015; Flores & Barahona-López, 2021). Against this background, Section 29(1)(a) of the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa, Act 108 of 1996, accords the right to basic education to everyone, including incarcerated persons. Therefore, in correctional centers or schools, curriculum delivery rests on the shoulders of CEs who, in addition to teaching, are entrusted with a plethora of other responsibilities. Research shows that educators in correctional settings not only empathize with students but also evaluate their teaching success through student feedback – verbal, behavioral, or social. Themes such as emotional well-being, institutional support, and regular student check-ins underscore the complex and multifaceted roles educators must assume – often without adequate resources (Flores & Barahona-López, 2021). According to Flores and Barahona-López (2021), emotional labor in correctional settings impacts more than just job satisfaction or pedagogy. Teachers face a "double bind," in which they must work harder to ensure students' academic success while simultaneously developing alternative curricula and expanding their pedagogical approaches to meet the unique demands of prison education.

In South Africa, Stamp (2020) identified both extrinsic barriers (e.g., poor infrastructure, irrelevant curricula) and intrinsic challenges (e.g., communication gaps, learner behavioral issues) affecting prison education. Greyvensteyn (2014) and Lawton (2012) further emphasize the complexity introduced by inmates' diverse educational backgrounds, which often requires tailored interventions – an approach that remains impractical in under-resourced prisons. These findings underscore the difficult conditions CEs must navigate, significantly impeding their teaching effectiveness. Additionally, technological limitations present substantial challenges in correctional education (Mdakane et al., 2022; 2024). As educational

delivery shifts towards digital and distance learning, many prisons face obsolete infrastructure, restricted access to technology, and security policies that limit the use of digital tools (Barrow et al., 2019; Greyvensteyn, 2014; Watts, 2010). These constraints hinder both educators and students from accessing online resources, communicating with external institutions, and utilizing digital learning platforms. Unlike mainstream schools, correctional centers are often marked by systemic barriers. Mkosi and Mahlangu (2015) argue that educational programs are not prioritized, and institutional leadership frequently fails to support both teachers and learners. These challenges leave educators feeling demotivated, overburdened, and marginalized. Considering the empirical evidence, a gap remains in understanding how CEs' experiences and challenges of facilitating education in correctional environments affect their pedagogy and professional identity. Thus, to close this gap, this study aimed to provide a richer, more nuanced understanding of the experiences and realities of CEs and how teaching at a South African male correctional facility influenced their pedagogy and professional identity.

3. Theoretical Framework

This study is grounded in the Professional Identity Formation (PIF) Framework as articulated by Beijaard et al. (2004). This framework conceptualizes professional identity as a multidimensional, dynamic, and context-dependent construct that evolves over time through lived experiences, reflection, and social interaction. It is especially relevant for understanding how educators construct meaning around their professional roles in complex and constrained environments such as correctional education. According to Beijaard et al. (2004), PIF is shaped through three interrelated dimensions:

Subject matter expertise – the educator's knowledge of the content and academic disciplines they teach

Didactical expertise – their ability to design and deliver effective instructional strategies

Pedagogical expertise – their understanding of and relationship with learners, including their emotional and moral development

In this study, the PIF framework provides a lens through which to analyze how CEs' identities are formed, challenged, and redefined by their experiences within the prison context. Together, these three domains form the foundation of a teacher's professional competence. Effective teaching emerges from the dynamic interplay between subject matter expertise,

didactical expertise, and pedagogical expertise. At the intersection of all three domains lies transformative teaching, the practice of shaping understanding, values, and identity through integrated expertise. The framework allows for the exploration of how these educators negotiate their sense of self and professional purpose amidst institutional constraints, limited resources, and evolving responsibilities. It acknowledges that the teaching profession requires educators to go beyond teaching and assume a counseling role, as they are deeply involved in shaping and guiding students' overall development (Tisuela & Callo, 2022). This emphasizes that PI is not static, but rather a continual process of negotiation and adaptation, particularly salient in a correctional environment where educators are often required to assume multiple roles, including that of teacher, counselor, and mentor. Moreover, the framework supports an understanding of how CEs derive professional fulfilment, purpose, and emotional connection to their work despite systemic challenges. It also enables an examination of the disjuncture they experience, such as between their training and the realities of correctional teaching, which may result in identity tension, dissatisfaction, or adaptation. By applying the PIF framework, this study not only centers the voices and lived experiences of CEs but also contributes to a deeper understanding of how professional identity is shaped in under-researched and marginalized educational contexts.

4. Methodology

This study employed a phenomenological research design to explore the meanings CEs attribute to their lived experiences (Creswell, 2014). As a qualitative approach, this design was well-suited to the study's aim, enabling an in-depth examination of the educators' experiences within the context of their professional roles (Rahman, 2016; Terre Blanche et al., 2014). Participants were purposively selected from a correctional center located in Gauteng province, South Africa. This center was chosen because it provides diverse educational programs, including Adult Basic Education and Training (ABET), Technical Vocational Education and Training (TVET), and Unisa's Comprehensive Open Distance and e-Learning (CODeL). The variety of programs offered allowed for the selection of a heterogeneous sample, enriching the diversity of experiences captured. To ensure meaningful insights, the inclusion criterion required participants to have more than one year of teaching experience within correctional education. This was intended to elicit detailed narratives from individuals familiar with the prison education context and to exclude novice educators still adjusting to the correctional

environment. As Wright (2005), cited in Lukacova et al., (2018)) notes, "prison teachers in the initial phase are more likely to be fascinated by the new, exotic environment and captivation with the new experience prevails."

Table 1 presents the participants' demographic details, including age, gender, racial background, highest qualification, and years of teaching experience.

Table 1

Demographics of the study participants

Participant	Age	Gender	Race	Highest qualification	No of years as DCS educator
1	57	Female	Black	N. Dip	25
2	58	Female	Black	BEd	28
3	45	Male	Black	MEd	6
4	57	Male	White	N. Dip	32
5	53	Female	Black	BEd	31
6	58	Male	Black	BA	10
7	N/A	Female	Black	N. Dip	04
8	56	Female	Black	BEd (Hons)	25
9	50	Female	Black	BEd (Hons)	26
10	57	Female	Black	BEd	10
11	49	Female	Black	BEd (Hons)	08

Their tenure with DCS ranged from 4 to 32 years, with an average of 18,6 years. This considerable range and depth of experience offered varied perspectives, contributing to a richer, more nuanced understanding of the realities and challenges of facilitating education in a correctional setting. It also enabled the identification of common themes, patterns, and distinctions among participants' experiences.

To gain access to the correctional center, and by extension, the study population, the researchers followed the protocol outlined by DCS's Research Ethics Committee (REC). In line with this protocol, an internal gatekeeper, which, in this case, was the center's Head of Education, was assigned to facilitate access. The researchers liaised with the Head of Education to identify and recruit participants who met the study's inclusion criteria. The study invitation was prominently displayed in an area regularly frequented by educators, ensuring visibility and engagement from potential participants. This recruitment method was intentional, aiming to include information-rich participants with the relevant knowledge and experience of the phenomenon under investigation (Willig, 2013).

Following the distribution of the study invitation, participant information sheet, and ethical clearance, formal permission was granted to access the site and conduct the research.

Data collection was conducted over four days within the school section premises of the correctional center, using one-on-one semi-structured interviews. While participants were allowed to speak for as long as they wished, each interview was limited to a maximum duration of 90 minutes. This approach was designed to be respectful of participants' time and to minimise interview fatigue. Additionally, it accommodated the preferences of early participants who opted to be interviewed during work hours allocated by their supervisor (the Head of Education), rather than outside their personal time. At the time of data collection, five participants were teaching in the ABET program, four in Unisa's CODeL, and two in TVET. Demographic details of the sample revealed that 72.7% (8 out of 11) were female and 27.3% (3 out of 11) were male. In terms of racial composition, 90.9% (10 out of 11) identified as Black and 9.1% (1 out of 11) as White. The average participant age was 54 years; however, the age of Participant 7 was excluded to protect confidentiality.

This study employed Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) to analyse the data. IPA is characterized by a flexible, non-linear process that is fluid and open to adaptation and evolves creatively (Bartoli, 2020; Noon, 2018). Unlike other qualitative methods, IPA does not prescribe rigid guidelines for data analysis but rather emphasizes a dynamic interpretative process (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014). Central to IPA is the concept of the double hermeneutic, which acknowledges the dual role of interpretation, participants make sense of their experiences, and researchers, in turn, interpret those accounts through their own lens (Alase, 2017; Smith, 2017).

To explore the lived experiences of CEs and the meanings they attach to facilitating education within a corrections-based school, an inductive approach was followed. The initial stage of analysis involved listening to the audio-recorded interviews multiple times, followed by transcribing and repeatedly reading the transcripts. This process is known as immersion and it assisted the researchers to become intimately familiar with the content, while making analytical observations in line with the study's research questions (Bartoli, 2020; Schurink et al., 2021).

In the second stage, all transcripts were reviewed carefully, margin notes were made, and key words, phrases, and metaphors were highlighted. According to Bartoli (2020), this phase focuses on two key elements: semantic content and language. Due to the level of detail required, this phase proved to be the most time-consuming. The third stage involved identifying emergent themes across all transcripts. The researchers analyzed the notes for

recurring patterns and trends, which allowed for the development of interpretative themes that captured the essence of participants shared experiences.

The researchers sought permission to conduct the study from the Humanities Faculty Research Ethics Committee at the University of Pretoria (HUM026/0723) and the Department of Correctional Services Research Ethics Committee. Both institutions granted ethical clearance. Correspondingly, all measures to uphold research integrity, including compliance with ethical standards, were observed. Educators who volunteered to participate reached out; informed consent forms were administered, and none of the participants were excluded from the study. A sample size comprising 11 participants was deemed sufficient for the study. Participants were informed how confidentiality and anonymity were going to be upheld, not only to protect their identity but also to encourage honest and candid responses that genuinely reflected their experiences. This included, for example, observing the rule of anonymity (such as referring to them as Participant 1, Participant 2, etc.), rather than their real names. Open discussions were held with the participants prior to the commencement of the interviews, where the participants' comprehension of their involvement in the study and willingness to participate were established.

5. Findings

Based on the study's research questions, four (4) key themes emerged in the final data analysis process, namely: the ageing correctional educator; shortage of correctional educators; lack of adequate teaching resources; and lack of teacher development training programs.

Table 2

Study themes

Research Questions	Study Themes
In what ways do the teaching experiences of educators in a South African prison school inform their pedagogical practices and shape their professional identity?	The Ageing Correctional Educator
What challenges (if any) do correctional educators experience, and to what extent is institutional support, both by Unisa and the Department of Correctional Services (DCS) made available to correctional educators?	Shortage of Correctional Educators Lack of adequate teaching resources Lack of Teacher Development Training Programs

Theme 1: The Ageing Correctional Educator

Correctional education plays a critical role in offender rehabilitation, with educators at its core. When asked about their background and professional development as educators, the CEs' responses suggested an ageing workforce with substantial teaching experience, often migrating from mainstream (DoE) to prison education (DCS). For example, several participants, including Participants 11, 3, and 4, began their careers at the DoE (where they were previously employed as teachers) before transitioning to the DCS. Participant 11's response indicates a high level of professional and extensive experience serving in dual capacities (mainstream and correctional education). She said (responses presented verbatim),

> *"I started working for correctional services in 2015, but before that, I worked at the Department of Education for 8 years as an educator, so all in all it is 17 years."* Participant 11

Participant 11's teaching career, totaling 17 years' experience, initially began at the DoE and later led to DCS employment, implying, implicitly, that correctional education is not typically perceived as a first career choice. Rather, it becomes a secondary option following teaching in mainstream education. Participant's 3 narrative also reinforces the notion that most DCS educators joined correctional services after many years as teachers in the DoE. Participant 3 said:

> *"I started working for the Department [of Correctional Services] in July 2018. But initially, I worked many years for the Department of Basic Education."*

Experience in correctional education varies considerably across studies. For example, in this study, Participant 1 indicated that she has worked in correctional services since 1999, amounting to 25 years' experience and emphasizing her, and other colleagues' imminent retirement. She said,

> *"It all started when I was an ABET teacher and DCS was looking for teachers. That's when I came here in 1999 to work for DCS...but I'm leaving for pension [soon], and we have a pool that must go, even the educationists. Most of us are in our late 50s and must go."* Participant 1

Age is another demographic that varied considerably among CEs. In comparison to other studies, the average age of participants in this study was 54 years. Yet given the long

tenure of these educators and their nearing retirement, there is a risk of sustainability regarding the upcoming wave of retirements, especially among female educators approaching their 60s. Participant 4 also reiterated her 29-year-long service in the DCS by stating that:

> *"I started my teaching career outside with the Department of Education and came to work here [correctional services] in 1996."*

Taken together, these extracts show that CEs share some common demographic characteristics, such as key differences in age and professional experience. It can also be argued that the majority (72.7%) of CEs are female educators with considerable amount of experience in mainstream education, before transitioning to the role of CE. Implicitly, this implies that none of the CEs started their teaching career at the DCS. Inarguably, with an average age of 54 years, the results suggest that many of them face imminent retirement. Thus, with an ageing DCS cohort, these findings highlight the need for succession planning, knowledge transfer initiatives, and recruitment policies to mitigate the impact of mass retirements.

Theme 2: Shortage of Correctional Educators

The support for this theme emerged from the study participants and confirmed the critical shortage of qualified personnel in the education sector. The analysis of the participants' responses emphasized several key issues related to the availability, recruitment, and qualification of educators. Participant 4 stressed that while financial assistance is often sought, the real challenge is the lack of qualified teachers to deliver subject-specific education. He said,

> *"Yes, we need all the kind of support we can get, especially from our external stakeholders. We are a few educationists. Obviously, there's the financial support that we require, but it's not a thing external organization can easily help with. You can have a school with classes and everything and many, many learners, but we need a lot of qualified teachers for specific subjects...I think that's our biggest issue."* Participant 4

According to Gearhart (2021), many people are unaware that offenders have the opportunity, and, at times, are mandated to participate in correctional education. Consequently, teaching in prison is something that many people never consider as a career option, which adds to the shortage of CEs. Participant 1 elaborated on the impact of this shortage by pointing out

that Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) and National Certificate Vocational (NCV) programs are suffering due to the absence of trained educators. She said,

> *"Anybody with grade 12 can teach ABET [hence] we are looking for educationists. We have TVET, NCV, level 2, 3, 4, yet there's only one educationist. And because of this, we normally exclude certain subjects due to a lack of teachers…that's the background of prison education and the reason correctional center Z closed shop, [because] there are no teachers."* Participant 1

From this extract, one could argue that there is relatively little support for correctional education by way of recruiting adequate educators Likewise, the case of correctional center Z shutting down due to a lack of educators exemplifies the severity of the issue. Participant 6 also raised concerns about the recruitment processes within DCS, where internal appointments often result in unqualified personnel taking up teaching roles. He said,

> *"Well, the challenge is that in correctional services, some appointments are done internally, and therefore one is unable to recruit qualified personnel. So, you shouldn't be surprised that somebody who was previously a security official is converted to become an educator."* Participant 6

The conversion of ordinary DCS personnel into educators without requisite qualifications can be attributed directly to personnel shortages and undermines the integrity of the education system. This practice presents significant challenges to the goal of providing quality and comprehensive education. Participant 3 accentuates the overwhelming burden placed on educators by demonstrating the ripple effect of this personnel deficit.

> *"It's a bit tough here because of the multiple roles we play. For instance, where I previously worked, I used to focus only on formal education. Level 1 to 4, and grade 10 -12. But now with the added responsibility, there's Unisa, Skills Development, TVET, and also SRAC [Sport Recreation Arts and Culture]. These were not part of my responsibilities."* Participant 3

This theme underscored a pressing need for structural reforms in personnel management within correctional education. Addressing the shortage of qualified educators through strategic recruitment, professional development, and institutional support is essential to improving educational outcomes and facilitating rehabilitation within the correctional system.

Theme 3: Lack of adequate Teaching Resources

This theme highlighted a significant challenge relating to the lack of adequate teaching resources. The narratives from participants underscored systemic issues such as outdated technology, poor internet connectivity, and inadequate infrastructure. These constraints not only hinder the educators' ability to perform effectively but also negatively impact the learning experiences of incarcerated students. Participant 11 expressed the frustration of working with "very old" computers, many of which lack the essential software, and the complete absence of internet access. For instance, her account revealed a long-standing issue of unreliable, as well as outdated computers for CEs and the emotional impact of teaching in an under-resourced school.

> *"We live on borrowed makeshift computers. Our computers are very old, they are very, very old. Some don't even have certain software in them. I also do not have access to the internet when I'm inside prison. For almost 15 years now. It's even more painful now; I sit with the network down."* Participant 11

Despite pedagogical and technological changes in the educational landscape, CEs are not provided with the required technology that makes on-line teaching and learning possible, thus limiting their ability to design and deliver effective instructional strategies. The reliance on outdated and malfunctioning computers further compounds the difficulties faced by educators. Participant 7 corroborated this challenge by highlighting the issues surrounding the institution's Wi-Fi, which, despite its presence, remains largely non-functional. She said,

> *"They are failing our school. Students go through a range of challenges, from writing assignments, submission of assignments, including this technology. We do have Wi-Fi, but no connection. It is difficult for the Wi-Fi to connect."* Participant 7

The lack of a properly functioning Unisa hub, as mentioned by Participant 9, indicates a failure in digital infrastructure, which means that students struggle with even the most basic tasks, such as writing and submitting assignments. This deficiency further marginalizes incarcerated learners, making it difficult for them to transition into a digital-driven education system.

> *"We don't have a well-functioning hub. It doesn't function – so we can say there is no Unisa hub. Unisa is simply there by name. We are in between. Even now, the students are at the library. They were supposed to be at the hub, but luckily, we have a small iPad that they use to submit their assignments."* Participant 9

Participant 10's observation about the transition from physical assignment submissions to digital platforms after the Covid-19 lockdown highlighted another critical issue, that is, students were neither prepared for nor adequately supported through this transition.

> *"I feel there is a gap; remember, even before the Covid-19 outbreak, students used to post physical copies of their assignments, but when things changed, the students were not prepared for this technology. So, at times it becomes a challenge even for them and wish someone from Unisa could come and resolve the challenges experienced by the students."* Participant 10

According to Mahlangu (2025), this finding underscores the need to provide incarcerated students with educational opportunities such as access to technology and study materials. This includes training staff and students on how to effectively use these tools. The disparity between the presence of technological resources and their usability suggests a significant disconnect between the Memorandum of Understanding signed by Unisa and the DCS regarding the practical support for incarcerated students. In a digital age where online learning environments are pivotal, this technological deprivation severely hampers the ability of incarcerated students to keep up with modern educational requirements relative to non-incarcerated students.

Theme 4: Lack of Teacher Development Training Programs

This theme highlights a critical gap in sustainable teacher development training within correctional services education. Participants' testimonies revealed neglect in professional development opportunities, leading to a disparity between correctional educators and those in mainstream education. Participant 1 pointed out the frustration of being denied opportunities to participate in moderation workshops. She said,

> *"[T]rust me, in my 25 years of being in DCS, I was never trained on anything. I mean, things are changing, yet teachers are not taken for moderation, computer skills training and what have you. And now we are expected to teach these skills, we don't have the resources. They don't take us to refresher workshops, instead I had to invest in my own upskilling…dodging the bullet, leaving prison one hour early to attend for over 3 months…all those things…moderation and the assessor course."* Participant 1

A similar sentiment was shared by Participant 10, who explicitly contrasted her experience with teachers outside correctional services, emphasizing that educators in mainstream schools received regular training and workshop opportunities, whereas those within correctional services did not.

> *"There is a huge difference. Teachers outside [correctional services] are more empowered than us because they are taken to attend workshops; they are taken to trainings and are continuously being developed. Whereas with us here, they don't develop us."* Participant 10

The absence of training opportunities limits their ability to stay updated with new pedagogical strategies, curriculum changes, and technological advancements in education. Participant 1 further underscored the absence of in-service training and its unintended effect on the credibility and effectiveness of the education they provide. She elaborated thusly,

> *"This is the DCS we find ourselves in; they don't do in-service training for teachers where, for example, they organize a workshop and say 'Teachers, this week you are attending a workshop on Excel only.' And then we must come back and implement it here. No, we receive no such training, nothing at all…we are not empowered with anything, we are essentially on our own."* Participant 1

Participant 3 expanded on this issue, noting the introduction of new curriculum policies such as CAPS (Curriculum Assessment Policy Statements), which require proper training for effective implementation. He said,

> *"Sometimes we are joined by new educators who come straight from university and have content gap in terms of how they are supposed to teach and require in-service training. Remember, it doesn't mean they are specialists, there's a lot of curriculum adaptation coming into prison. But here, once hired, you are only taken for workshop training to manage schools…other than that, there are no trainings that are happening. For instance, there is CAPS now, as per the policy, we are supposed to be taken in and informed about CAPS, what it's all about. But it does not happen."* Participant 3

In-service training is essential for teachers to align their teaching and assessment methods with the national education standards, as well as to keep abreast of the best practices in education. However, and by contrast, without the opportunities to provide workshops on CAPS demonstrates a lack of commitment to equipping teachers with the necessary skills and

knowledge to implement current educational policies. It must be noted that sustainable teacher development is not just an investment in educators but a crucial step towards ensuring that rehabilitation through education is meaningful and effective.

6. Discussion

Numerous studies across different geographical contexts have explored the role of CEs, thus revealing important trends and contrasts in terms of age, gender and educational background. Teaching experience is another demographic that varies notably. The results of the present study suggest that the average teaching experience of the South African correctional educator is approximately 20 years (18,6 years). In their study, Mkosi and Mahlangu (2015) interviewed a total of six educators, comprising 50 percent (3 out of 6) females and 50 percent (3 out of 6) males. In this study, 83 percent (5 out of 6) of the participants claimed to have started teaching in the DoE before joining the DCS. This suggests that prior to joining the department as DCS employees, they already possessed the required skills, competencies and previous experience of being teachers. In contrast, Sinalumbu (2007) found that a majority (62.6%) of CEs had less than five years' teaching experience, indicating a relatively novice group. Conversely, Mafilika and Marongwe (2024) highlighted a mix of experience, including new recruits and long-serving DCS staff. Likewise, in her study, Gearhart (2021) reported educators with 5 to 20 years of experience, and Stamp (2020) found that nearly half of the participants had 11-20 years of teaching experience. Overall, these results support the idea that the majority of DCS educators entered correctional services only after spending several years teaching within the Department of Education.

Age was another demographic factor that showed significant variation among correctional educators. Compared to findings from other studies, participants in this study had a higher average age of 54 years. By comparison, a previous study by Sinalumbu (2007) found that most educators (50%) were between 26 and 34 years old, indicating a younger cohort. Similarly, Flores and Barahona-López (2021) reported a broad age range (23 to 58), with many educators in their 30s and 40s. In contrast, Eide and Westrheim (2023) documented a wide age spread from young graduates to long-serving officers, suggesting that correctional education attracts both early-career and experienced professionals.

Regarding gender distribution, the results revealed that 72.7% (8 out of 11) were female and 27.3% (3 out of 11) were male. This state of disequilibrium underscores several key

challenges, chief among them being the shortage of CEs (Parry, 2024). In support of this premise, a contemporary South African study sought to evaluate the andragogical numeracy practices employed by CEs in a correctional facility in the province of KwaZulu-Natal (Mbatha, 2024). The findings revealed that teaching in a correctional center classroom is undertaken by adult offenders who engage in collaborative work with their peers, suggesting a shortage of qualified CEs. In the absence of qualified personnel, one could argue that this shortage has far-reaching implications on the quality of education provided and limits the subjects that are offered.

Other similar and comparable challenges included the lack of adequate teaching resources such as outdated technology, poor internet connectivity, and inadequate infrastructure. In their study, Mdakane et al. (2024) explored the learning experiences of 29 purposively sampled female students incarcerated at four female correctional centers across three provinces in South Africa. The results showed that online participation in both learning and assessment is affected by unreliable Unisa-DCS hubs due to the security-focused nature of the correctional centers (Mdakane et al., 2022). Previous literature confirms that learning and teaching support materials (LTSM) are not adequately available in prisons (Manzini, 2015). Correspondingly, Australian research conducted with incarcerated students at four Queensland correctional centers suggests that the global shift towards paperless e-learning environments has created new challenges for prisoners without direct internet access (Hopkins & Farley, 2014). In this regard, poorly functioning hubs serve to highlight deficiencies in digital infrastructure, resulting in students facing difficulties with fundamental academic tasks like writing and submitting assignments. This situation is further compounded by the lack of teacher development training programs. According to the literature, teachers come to corrections with good content knowledge, but no knowledge of their daily routine of what working in prisons entails (Jurich et al., 2001). Consequently, this lack of development, which is crucial for ensuring assessment consistency and fairness, could lead to inconsistent teaching methods, reducing the effectiveness of educational programs for incarcerated learners. Towards this end, Moyo et al. (2022) assert that CEs must strive to manage the curriculum effectively and efficiently and further recommend planning and developing an effective in-service development program for the DCS. Furthermore, without such training, educators are left struggling to adapt to evolving curriculum requirements, potentially compromising the quality of education provided to incarcerated learners.

6. Conclusion

This paper highlights significant demographic details of the correctional educator, showing that they are generally an older cohort of the Department of Correctional Services with extensive teaching experience. The ageing workforce suggests an impending shortage of skilled CEs as experienced teachers retire. Furthermore, it reveals that many of them began working from mainstream education before transitioning to correctional services, indicating a deep emotional commitment to the teaching profession. This confirms that their professional identity formation (PIF) is shaped through their understanding of and relationship with learners, including their emotional and moral development, referred to as pedagogical expertise.

Despite numerous challenges, including a shortage of correctional educators and teaching resources and a lack of sustainable professional development opportunities, CEs expressed a strong desire for continuous learning, training, and institutional support in pursuit of their own professional growth and empowerment. Their experiences also suggest a dire need for in-service training, which is essential for CEs to align their teaching and assessment methods with the national education standards, as well as to keep abreast of the best practices in education.

Regarding the study's limitations, it is acknowledged that the small sample size, together with the fact that the study was conducted in a single, male-only correctional facility, deprives the study of balanced perspectives. Therefore, based on the study results, it is recommended that future longitudinal studies should involve more educators in female correctional facility schools, as well as introduce and implement institutionalized, continuous professional development (CPD) programs to assist with the ongoing learning of CE. In practice, this means that DCS, in collaboration with the DoE, should invest in campaigns aimed at recruiting younger and newer educators, and pair more experienced educators with novice teachers to transfer skills and knowledge, while sharing practical and relevant experience.

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Institutional Review Board Statement

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