

Unlocking Minds Behind Bars: Inmates' Perceptions of Educational Services in South-East Nigerian Prisons

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Abstract: *This study explores inmates' perceptions of educational services in Southeast Nigerian prisons, focusing on their role in rehabilitation and reintegration. Using a qualitative design grounded in the capability approach and interpretive phenomenological analysis, data were gathered through in-depth interviews with 15 convicted inmates across three correctional facilities in Southeast Nigeria. Interviews were conducted in English and Nigerian Pidgin, and analyzed using NVivo 12. Findings revealed three major themes: the relevance and accessibility of educational programs, benefits such as improved self-worth, skill acquisition, and hope for reintegration, and key barriers like limited access, inadequate resources, and institutional apathy. Although the capability approach has some limitations in capturing structural constraints, it was valuable for illuminating inmates' agency, aspiration, and life goals within restrictive environments. The study situates these perceptions within the broader Nigerian correctional landscape, where regional disparities including shortages of qualified educators, infrastructural decay, and inconsistent program delivery affect service quality. The study underscores the need for policy reforms that expand prison education and centers inmate voices in social work discourse, positioning education as crucial for rehabilitation, justice, and social inclusion.*

Keywords: *Capability approach, correctional education, forensic social work, inmates, rehabilitation, reintegration.*

Introduction

Correctional education is globally recognized as a fundamental tool for reducing recidivism, promoting rehabilitation, and facilitating the successful reintegration of incarcerated individuals into society (Davis et al., 2013; United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization [UNESCO], 2022). It includes a range of learning opportunities, such as literacy programs, vocational training, secondary and tertiary education, and life skills development. These educational efforts are designed to equip inmates with the cognitive and social skills necessary for lawful and productive post-release lives. In Nigeria, correctional education is legally supported by the Nigerian Correctional Service Act (2019), which mandates the provision of formal and informal education to inmates. Despite this legislative backing, implementation remains inconsistent and plagued by challenges such as inadequate funding, infrastructure deficits, and lack of qualified personnel (Ogunode et al., 2023). These issues limit the effectiveness of rehabilitation initiatives and compromise the transformative potential of education within correctional facilities.



The Nigerian Correctional Service (NCoS), through partnerships with governmental and non-governmental organizations, has initiated various educational services, ranging from adult literacy classes to vocational and tertiary education programs. Institutions such as the National Open University of Nigeria (NOUN) have played a pivotal role in extending educational access to inmates across the country (Akpan et al., 2023). Through a formal partnership with the Nigerian Correctional Service, NOUN operates special study centres within selected custodial facilities, where inmates can enroll in accredited diploma and degree programmes. The university provides learning materials, tutorials, and examination facilitation inside the prisons, allowing inmates to study without leaving the facility. Although NOUN primarily focuses on academic instruction rather than social work services, its programmes indirectly support rehabilitation by strengthening inmates' psychosocial wellbeing, motivation, and post-release prospects. However, disparities persist across regions. Existing studies suggest that southern regions, particularly the Southeast, face comparatively higher infrastructural decay, fewer qualified instructors, and irregular program delivery when compared with the Southwest and North (Uche et al., 2024a, Nwosu & Ubah, 2022). These contextual gaps shape inmates' experiences in ways that remain underexamined. Comparatively, research in Europe and North America indicates that structured prison education programs often benefit from adequate staffing, comprehensive curricula, and systematic reintegration support (Costelloe & Warner, 2014; Hawley et al., 2013). In contrast, Southeast Nigerian prisons operate under chronic underfunding, infrastructural challenges, and inconsistent program delivery, which constrains the transformative potential of education. This contrast underscores the uniqueness of the Southeast context, where inmates' access to education is often mediated by informal networks, literacy levels, and intermittent NGO support, factors less prominent in other regions or countries. More critically, limited research has examined how inmates themselves interpret the relevance, accessibility, and impact of these programs, creating a disconnect between policy intentions and lived realities. Without insight into inmates' perspectives, policies and interventions risk being ineffective, underutilized, or misaligned with the rehabilitative goals of correctional education.

Southeastern Nigeria correctional institutions offer basic educational services; however, the reach and relevance of these programs remain underexplored, particularly from the inmates' own perspectives. Acknowledging inmates as primary stakeholders in their rehabilitation journey is crucial for evaluating program success and enhancing service delivery. Their perceptions offer valuable insight into the accessibility, usefulness, and constraints of current educational offerings. Furthermore, understanding the Southeast context is essential because the region faces distinct structural and sociopolitical challenges including overcrowding, ethnic diversity, and resource shortages that shape educational participation differently from other Nigerian regions or international settings.

A notable gap in existing scholarship is the limited integration of social work practices within prison education systems in Nigeria. Social workers, as trained rehabilitation agents, have the capacity to facilitate individualized learning plans, counsel inmates, and advocate for program reforms that align with rehabilitative goals (Aliyu et al., 2017; Uche, 2024). It is important to note that this recommendation arises from a system-level perspective rather than from participants' own accounts. While inmates did not explicitly identify the need for social workers, existing literature supports their potential to enhance program delivery and rehabilitation outcomes. However, this role is largely absent in current practice, and while important, this is a system-level implication rather than a theme arising directly from inmates' accounts, a distinction this study clarifies in response to gaps noted in prior literature.

This study seeks to address the underrepresentation of inmate voices in the discourse on prison education, particularly in Southeast Nigeria. It aims to explore inmates' lived experiences and perceptions of educational services within correctional facilities. The following research questions guide this inquiry:

- (1) How do inmates perceive the availability and relevance of the educational programs offered to them?
- (2) What benefits do inmates associate with participation in correctional education?
- (3) What challenges do inmates encounter in accessing and participating in educational services?

By foregrounding the perspectives of incarcerated individuals, the study aims to contribute to more inclusive and effective correctional education policy and practice, and to situate these findings within both national and international debates on prison education, highlighting similarities and context-specific differences.

Literature Review

Correctional education has gained widespread scholarly attention for its rehabilitative and reintegrative benefits. Studies conducted globally demonstrate that access to structured education in prison significantly lowers recidivism rates and fosters positive behavioral transformation (Davis et al., 2013; Esperian, 2010). Programs that range from basic literacy to tertiary education have been found to enhance inmates' self-worth, employability, and social adaptability (UNESCO, 2022; Uche et al., 2023). However, these global trends may not fully reflect regional variations, making it necessary to contextualize findings within specific sociopolitical and correctional systems such as Nigeria, where conditions vary significantly across geopolitical regions.

In the Nigerian context, the Nigerian Correctional Service Act, 2019, mandates the integration of educational and vocational training into prison operations. Nonetheless, institutional realities frequently contradict these statutory commitments. Empirical evidence indicates that educational programs in Nigerian prisons are inconsistently available, poorly funded, and dependent on NGO partnerships for sustainability (Ogunode et al., 2023; Sarkinfada & Garba, 2023). What remains insufficiently explored is how these systemic inconsistencies manifest differently across Nigeria's regions, particularly the Southeast, where prison overcrowding, infrastructural decay, and intense security pressures shape daily operations.

Partnerships with educational bodies such as NOUN have expanded inmate access to tertiary learning, but challenges remain. Akpan et al. (2023) note that many inmates cannot participate effectively due to limited literacy, inadequate preparatory programs, and inconsistent administrative support. Additionally, vocational programs such as tailoring, carpentry, and ICT training are often under-resourced and inaccessible to many inmates (Goyal & Tiwari, 2021; Althoneibat, 2022). These challenges mirror findings in West Africa and other low- and middle-income countries (LMICs), where prison education systems are often overstretched and underregulated.

Research in Southeast Nigeria underscores the importance of well-structured vocational programs in improving inmate behavior and reducing reoffending (Uche et al., 2015; Rekiya & Dean, 2023). However, the literature also identifies significant disparities in program quality, delivery, and participation. Deebom et al. (2019) and Nseobot and Effiong (2019) highlight how infrastructural limitations, lack of qualified instructors, and administrative inefficiencies undermine program success. Yet, existing studies tend to focus primarily on program availability and outcomes rather than on inmates' lived experiences, motivations, or perceptions, an omission directly relevant to the current study.

Understanding how inmates perceive educational offerings is crucial for evaluating their impact. Uche et al. (2023) found that many inmates are unaware of the available educational services or are excluded from participation due to arbitrary selection criteria. In another study, Uche et al. (2024b) emphasized that educational content often fails to align with inmates' interests or comprehension levels, leading to disengagement and high dropout rates. However, these studies did not explore perceptions specifically within the Southeast, nor did they examine how sociocultural expectations, identity reconstruction, or prison subcultures shape educational participation, key gaps this study addresses.

Vocational training has shown notable benefits. Mboho and Ataire (2018) reported that participants in skill acquisition programs exhibited positive behavioral changes and developed post-release aspirations. However, barriers such as overcrowded classrooms, inadequate instructional materials, and inconsistent teaching schedules limit the scalability of such success stories. Systemic challenges including underfunding, stigmatization, and reliance on unsustainable NGO-driven models persist throughout Nigerian prisons (Uche et al., 2023; Uche, 2023). Several European and United Kingdom based studies document structural barriers to prison education including staff shortages, limited resources, prison regime constraints, and inconsistent access to learning (Costelloe & Warner, 2014; Hawley et al., 2013; Prisoners' Education Trust, 2022). However, there remains a paucity of peer reviewed research examining whether and how such challenges intersect with cultural, administrative, or resource inequalities in Southeast Nigerian prisons; this gap underscores the need for region specific, inmate centred studies. Comparative research from Scandinavia, the UK, and the US shows that structured education, co-production of learning experiences, and sufficient staff resources significantly improve engagement and post-release outcomes (Costelloe & Warner, 2014; Prisoners' Education Trust, 2022). Integrating these insights highlights both the similarities in structural barriers faced by inmates globally and the distinctive challenges present in Southeast Nigerian prisons, particularly related to resource scarcity and reliance on informal access mechanisms.

A critically overlooked factor in the literature is the role of social work in enhancing correctional education. Social workers can provide psychological support, tailor programs to individual needs, and coordinate reintegration efforts (Aliyu et al., 2017; Uche, 2024). Yet, their integration into the correctional system remains minimal. Uche (2024) advocates for the institutionalisation of social work roles within prison settings to ensure effective counselling, program design, and advocacy. Despite this, the literature has not adequately explored how social work functions relate to inmate educational experiences, nor has it examined inmates' perspectives on the psychosocial or rehabilitative support they need.

Although some recent studies have explored correctional education in Nigeria broadly, very few have focused specifically on the Southeast region and even fewer have examined the role of social work in strengthening correctional education programs. This geographic gap in the literature, combined with the underrepresentation of inmate perspectives, underscores the need for the present study. Lovell et al., (2022) argue that without direct input from incarcerated individuals, prison education policies and programs risk being misaligned with actual rehabilitative needs.

Taken together, the reviewed literature highlights several persistent gaps that this study seeks to address. Specifically, Southeast Nigerian prisons are characterized by a combination of high overcrowding, ethnic diversity, limited educational staffing, inconsistent program delivery, and reliance on NGO interventions. These factors differentiate the region from other parts of Nigeria and from international contexts, making it essential to understand inmate experiences within this unique milieu. First, there is an inadequate regional analysis of prison education in Southeast Nigeria, leaving the unique characteristics and challenges of this context underexplored. Second, few studies have adopted inmate-centred qualitative approaches, limiting understanding of how incarcerated individuals themselves perceive and experience educational services. Third, there is minimal integration or comparison of Nigerian findings with global literature, which constrains insight into both common and context-specific patterns in correctional education. Finally, the potential role of social work in enhancing educational provision remains largely unexamined, despite evidence of its importance in facilitating rehabilitation, psychosocial support, and reintegration. By addressing these gaps, the present study contributes new knowledge on the educational experiences of inmates in Southeast Nigeria and informs policy and practice within the field of forensic social work.

Theoretical framework

This study is underpinned by the capability approach (CA) developed by economist and philosopher Sen (1999) and expanded by Nussbaum (2011). Initially, developed to critique narrow economic models of welfare, the CA has increasingly been adapted in education, social policy, and justice sectors for its human-centered and justice-oriented emphasis (Robeyns, 2017; Walker, 2006). Its focus on real freedoms rather than institutional provisions makes it particularly suitable for correctional settings where formal programs often exist without guaranteeing meaningful access.

The CA distinguishes between functionings, what individuals are able to do or become (e.g., being literate, employed, rehabilitated) and capabilities, which are the real opportunities available for them to achieve those functionings (Sen, 1999). In a correctional context, this distinction is vital: an educational program may exist as a resource, but an inmate's ability to participate and benefit from it depends on numerous conversion factors, including literacy level, mental health, institutional support, and sociocultural background (Unterhalter, 2003; Hart, 2012).

Inmates in Nigerian correctional facilities often face substantial structural and psychosocial barriers that limit their capability and set the range of real options available to them. These include poor infrastructure, lack of qualified instructors, restrictive prison routines, and unequal access to information about available programs (Ogunode et al., 2023). By focusing on these enabling or disabling conditions, the CA enables this study to interrogate not just whether correctional education exists, but whether it genuinely expands inmates' freedoms and life chances.

Moreover, the CA aligns closely with the values and goals of forensic social work, particularly its commitment to empowerment, social justice, and the transformation of oppressive systems (Dominelli, 2002; Uche, 2024). Forensic social workers, by advocating for equitable access to education, tailoring rehabilitation to individual needs, and facilitating reintegration planning, serve as key agents in enhancing inmates' capabilities. Their role is not only to provide services but to ensure that inmates have the real freedom to pursue

meaningful rehabilitation (Aliyu et al., 2017; Uche, 2024).

The CA also offers a normative framework for evaluating the success of correctional education. As Nussbaum (2011) argues, a just society is one in which individuals have access to a threshold level of essential capabilities including education, practical reasoning, and affiliation. Within the prison environment, this means assessing whether educational programs support not only cognitive development but also the restoration of dignity, agency, and hope functionings that are often eroded by incarceration (Epperson et al., 2014; Mboho & Ataire, 2018).

Ultimately, the CA enables inmate voices to be central to the evaluation of correctional education. It encourages inquiry into how individuals themselves perceive their freedoms, opportunities, and constraints, thus aligning with the qualitative, phenomenological orientation of this study. According to Walker and Unterhalter (2007), the capability approach emphasizes that individuals whose lives are being assessed, should be actively involved in determining what they value and the reasons behind those values. This participatory emphasis reinforces the importance of studying the lived experiences and subjective perceptions of incarcerated individuals.

The capability approach, though critiqued for its limited guidance on operationalization and context-specific application, remains well-suited to this study as it effectively frames inmates' access to and benefits from educational opportunities as essential capabilities for rehabilitation and reintegration.

The capability approach offers a holistic and ethically grounded framework for understanding the complexities of correctional education in Nigerian prisons. It enables this study to move beyond surface-level assessments of program availability and toward a deeper exploration of how education can or fails to enhance inmates' capabilities for transformation, reintegration, and meaningful social participation. This orientation strengthens the relevance of the study's findings for policy advocacy and professional practice within forensic social work.

Materials and Methods

Study design

This study adopted a qualitative research design using the interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA) framework, which focuses on understanding how individuals make sense of their lived experiences (Smith et al., 2009). IPA was applied to explore inmates' perceptions of educational services in correctional institutions in Southeast Nigeria, capturing both their personal experiences and the meanings they attach to participation. Guided by this analytic orientation, the study aimed to identify unanticipated insights and meaning-making processes, allowing themes to emerge from participants' narratives rather than being imposed a priori. This approach enabled the study to examine the perceived benefits of correctional education programs, as well as the challenges encountered by inmates.

Study area

This study was conducted in three correctional facilities located in three states in Southeast Nigeria. These facilities were purposively selected based on their relative operational stability, the presence of established educational programs, and formal approval granted by the Nigerian Correctional Service (NCoS) to conduct research. Each facility houses both male and female inmates, providing a diverse population for the study. Southeast Nigeria is socio-culturally diverse and has, in recent years, shown increased engagement with prison reform initiatives (Uche et al., 2015; Rekiya & Dean, 2023). Correctional institutions in the region implement various educational services, including adult literacy programs, vocational training, and tertiary education often in partnership with institutions such as the National Open University of Nigeria (Ogunode et al., 2023). This regional context offered a rich environment for examining how educational opportunities operate within varying institutional conditions across the Southeast.

Sampling procedure

A purposive sampling technique was used to select participants for the study. Correctional staff assisted by identifying inmates who met the inclusion criteria, after which the researcher approached these individuals to explain the study and obtain informed consent, ensuring that a diverse range of experiences was represented. This approach was appropriate given the study's focus on eliciting rich, in-depth information

from individuals with direct experience of the phenomenon under investigation (Patton, 2015). The inclusion criteria were as follows:

- Participants must be convicted inmates (not awaiting trial),
- Have participated in at least one educational program in prison for no less than three months,
- Be willing to give informed consent.

Given the relatively small proportion of female inmates in the study settings, 2 female and 3 male participants were selected from each correctional center to ensure gender-representative yet inclusive sampling. This approach aligns with Patton's (2015) emphasis on capturing key subgroup variation in qualitative inquiry and addresses the need for greater visibility of women's prison experiences, as underscored by the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime [UNODC] and the World Health Organization [WHO] (2011). Fifteen (15) participants were selected across the three correctional facilities (5 from each facility). This sample size is consistent with qualitative research standards where data saturation - the point at which no new themes emerge, is often achieved with small, focused samples (Guest et al., 2006). Additionally, the sample distribution supported comparative insights across facilities and gender groups, enhancing the robustness of the findings.

Data collection

Data were collected using In-Depth Interviews (IDIs), a method chosen for its strength in uncovering rich, contextualized insights from participants (Seidman, 2013). A semi-structured interview guide, developed based on existing literature and expert input, included open-ended questions about inmates' experiences with educational programs, perceived benefits, encountered challenges, and suggestions for improvement. Fieldwork was conducted between May and November 2021 across three correctional facilities in Southeast Nigeria. The extended duration of data collection was necessitated by several factors, including bureaucratic delays in gaining access to facilities, security protocols, restrictions around interview scheduling, and the need to establish trust with participants. These challenges have been well-documented in both foundational and recent studies on prison research (Gaber et al., 2025; Tschanz, 2022). These contextual realities reflect the complexities of conducting research in correctional settings and required sustained engagement to ensure data quality.

In-depth, semi-structured interviews were carried out with 15 incarcerated individuals who had participated in, or were aware of, educational programs within the prison system. Interviews were conducted in English and Nigerian Pidgin, depending on participants' language preferences. Each session lasted approximately 45 to 60 minutes and took place in a private space within the correctional facility to ensure confidentiality. With consent from both participants and prison authorities, all interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim for analysis. Field notes were also taken to capture non-verbal cues and contextual observations.

Data analysis

Data collected from the in-depth interviews were transcribed verbatim and analyzed using interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA), as proposed by Smith et al., (2009). This approach was appropriate because it allowed for an in-depth exploration of how inmates make sense of their educational experiences within the unique context of incarceration. The analysis followed a six-step iterative process: immersion in the data, initial noting, developing emergent themes, searching for connections across themes, moving to the next case, and finally identifying patterns across cases (Smith et al., 2009). NVivo 12 software was used to assist with data management and analysis. Specifically, the software helped organize interview transcripts, code participants' responses, and systematically track emerging patterns. Using NVivo allowed the researcher to efficiently compare codes across cases and identify recurring themes, ultimately supporting the development of three core themes aligned with the study's research questions: (1) perceived availability and relevance of educational services, (2) perceived benefits of participation, and (3) barriers to educational access. The iterative and interpretive progression ensured that the analytical process remained grounded in participants' voices while enabling higher-level thematic synthesis.

In-depth, semi-structured interviews were conducted to explore participants' experiences in correctional education. The interview questions were designed to align with the study's research questions and the sub-themes that later guided the thematic analysis. For the first theme, perceived availability and relevance of educational services, participants were asked questions about how they became aware of programs, the process

of registering, the content and delivery methods, and the perceived usefulness of these programs for post-release reintegration. For the second theme, perceived benefits of participation, questions focused on personal development, identity transformation, acquisition of academic and vocational skills, and social or moral rehabilitation. For the third theme, barriers to educational access, participants were asked about institutional and structural constraints, attitudes of staff and peers, and policy or resource limitations affecting program participation. These questions were open-ended, allowing participants to describe their experiences in their own words and providing rich data for interpretive phenomenological analysis (See Table 1).

Table 1*Interview guide*

S/No.	Themes	Sub-themes	Sample interview questions
1.	Perceived availability and relevance of educational services	a. Awareness and access to programs b. Curriculum content and delivery c. Relevance to future reintegration	• How did you first learn about the educational programs available to you? • Can you describe the process of registering for a program? • What do you think about the content of the programs? • Do the teaching methods help you understand and learn effectively? • How do you think these educational programs will help you after release? • Are the skills you are learning useful for your goals?"
2.	Perceived benefits of participation	a. Personal development and identity transformation b. Academic and vocational skills acquisition c. Social and moral rehabilitation	• Has participating in the programs changed the way you see yourself? • Do you feel more confident or motivated since joining? • What skills have you learned so far? • How do you plan to use these skills? • Has education influenced your behavior or relationships with others? • Have you learned anything about moral or social responsibilities?
3.	Barriers to educational access	a. Institutional and structural constraints b. Staff and peer attitudes c. Policy and resource limitations	• What challenges have you faced in accessing or attending programs? • Are there times when classes are canceled or unavailable? • How do prison staff or other inmates influence your participation? • Have you experienced any discouragement or support? • Are there sufficient materials, teachers, and support for the programs? • What would make the programs more effective?

These themes provided a rich framework for understanding the inmates' perspectives and were used to structure the presentation of findings. Trustworthiness was enhanced through member checking, peer debriefing, and triangulation, ensuring that the themes reflected participants' actual experiences and interpretations (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Trustworthiness was enhanced through a combination of member checking, peer debriefing, and triangulation, adapted to the constraints of the correctional setting. Member checking was

conducted during the same interview sessions, where participants reviewed and clarified key points of their responses to ensure accuracy. Triangulation was achieved through multiple strategies: investigator triangulation, in which multiple researchers independently reviewed and coded transcripts with discrepancies resolved collaboratively; peer debriefing, involving regular discussions with the research team to critically examine coding decisions, emerging themes, and interpretations; and case comparison, which allowed patterns to be confirmed across participants, providing internal consistency and reducing individual bias. These strategies ensured that the findings were rigorously examined and credible, despite relying on a single data collection method. An audit trail documenting analytic decisions further strengthened the credibility and dependability of the results.

Ethical considerations

Ethical approval for this study was obtained from the Research Ethics Review Board of the University of Nigeria, Nsukka. In addition, formal permission to conduct the research was granted by the Officers-in-charge of the selected correctional centres. Participants were fully informed about the purpose of the study, the voluntary nature of their participation, the confidentiality of their responses, and their right to withdraw at any point without any consequence. Both verbal and written informed consent were obtained from all participants prior to data collection.

To protect anonymity, participants were assigned coded identifiers (e.g. P1, P2) instead of pseudonymous names, and no identifying information was included in the transcripts or final report. All ethical procedures adhered to the principles outlined by the World Medical Association (2013) in the Declaration of Helsinki, including informed consent, confidentiality, beneficence, non-maleficence, and respect for participants' rights. Secure data storage procedures were also implemented to prevent unauthorized access.

Results

The demographic profile of the 15 study participants included nine males and six females. Participants' ages ranged from 25 to 44 years, representing young to middle-aged adults. In terms of educational attainment prior to incarceration, the majority had completed secondary education (9 participants), three had vocational education backgrounds, two held tertiary qualifications, and one had incomplete secondary education. This indicates that most participants had basic educational exposure, with a few attaining higher academic or technical training before incarceration. Marital status varied: eight participants were married, five were single, one was widowed, and one was separated, reflecting diverse social support structures. The duration of incarceration ranged from 1 to 7 years, including both newly, and long-term, incarcerated individuals. These socio-economic characteristics provided a heterogeneous foundation from which diverse experiences and expectations regarding prison education naturally emerged (see Tables 2–4).

Table 2

Demographic characteristics of participants – Centre 1

Participant ID	Gender	Age	Educational level before incarceration	Marital status	Years incarcerated
P1	Male	34	Secondary Education	Single	2
P2	Female	25	Secondary Education	Single	1
P3	Male	41	Tertiary Education	Married	5
P4	Female	29	Secondary Education	Married	3
P5	Male	37	Secondary Education	Single	6

Source: *Author's fieldwork, 2021*

Table 3*Demographic characteristics of participants – Centre 2*

Participant ID	Gender	Age	Educational level before incarceration	Marital status	Years incarcerated
P6	Male	43	Vocational Education	Married	1
P7	Female	31	Secondary Education	Married	2
P8	Male	36	Vocational Education	Widowed	4
P9	Male	44	Tertiary Education	Married	3
P10	Female	28	Secondary Education	Single	3

Source: *Author's fieldwork, 2021***Table 4***Demographic characteristics of participants – Centre 3*

Participant ID	Gender	Age	Educational level before incarceration	Marital status	Years incarcerated
P11	Male	39	Incomplete Secondary Education	Separated	7
P12	Female	30	Secondary Education	Single	2
P13	Female	42	Vocational Education	Married	1
P14	Male	38	Secondary Education	Married	4
P15	Male	33	Secondary Education	Married	2

Source: *Author's fieldwork, 2021***Theme 1: Perceived availability and relevance of educational services**

The first major theme emerged inductively from participants' descriptions of daily life in the correctional centres, especially the extent to which educational opportunities were visible, accessible, and aligned with their personal goals. Rather than assuming that programs were widely accessible, inmates' accounts revealed a more layered reality where access was often unequal, unclear, or dependent on informal structures within the prison.

Awareness and access to programs

A recurring concern among participants was the lack of structured communication about educational opportunities within the correctional facilities. Many inmates reported that they became aware of available programs through informal channels rather than through formal orientations or announcements.

A participant shared his surprise at discovering the existence of classes months after his incarceration, stating:

Honestly, I didn't know there were educational classes here until my fourth month in prison. It was another inmate who told me. The officials don't announce it, and some inmates don't even get the chance to register (P1, Male, 34 years).

This lack of initial exposure to program information points to a systemic communication gap that may exclude new or less-connected inmates from participating. Another respondent highlighted the role of persistent advocacy and internal relationships in gaining access:

I had to beg the welfare officer several times before I was allowed to join the vocational class. It's not like everyone knows about it. If you don't push or have connections inside, you are left out (P4, Female, 29 years).

These testimonies underscore the informal and often inequitable pathways through which educational access is granted, highlighting concerns about fairness, transparency, and literacy-related barriers. One participant explained:

They post a list sometimes, but not everyone can read it. So those who need education the most can't even access it. It's frustrating because we are here to reform, but nobody tells you how to begin (P3, Male, 41 years).

These findings highlight the inequities in access that are particularly pronounced in Southeast Nigerian prisons due to infrastructural and literacy challenges. Globally, similar issues of informal access and communication gaps are reported in under-resourced prison systems, suggesting that ensuring equitable information flow is critical to program effectiveness worldwide.

Curriculum content and delivery

This subtheme developed from spontaneous participant reflections on teaching quality, progression opportunities, and learning conditions. While most participants expressed appreciation for the opportunity to engage in learning activities, they also highlighted significant gaps in curriculum structure, instructional delivery, and relevance. One female participant expressed frustration at the lack of structured learning pathways:

We mostly learn how to read and write, but it's very basic. I was hoping to continue my secondary school but there are no advanced materials or qualified teachers to take us further. You get stuck once you pass the beginner level (P2, Female, 25 years).

In addition to curriculum limitations, overcrowding and resource constraints were cited as barriers to effective vocational training. Participants described scenarios where poor infrastructure and inadequate tools made hands-on learning difficult. As one male inmate shared:

The tailoring class is helpful, but it's overcrowded. Sometimes we are over 30 people using just two machines. You end up watching more than doing. That makes learning very slow, and some people give up because they feel they are not gaining anything (P5, Male, 37 years).

In addition to basic literacy and skills training, some participants questioned the relevance and inclusivity of the curriculum, especially its alignment with diverse post-release aspirations. While moral and religious instruction was generally appreciated, it was also seen by some as inadequate on its own. One participant remarked:

They do teach us Bible studies and moral lessons, which I appreciate, but there should also be more skills-based training. Not everyone wants to preach. Some of us want to fix cars or farm. It should be balanced to meet everyone's needs (P6, Male, 43 years).

The gaps in curriculum relevance and teaching quality reflect broader systemic challenges in Nigeria that limit the transformative potential of correctional education. Comparatively, international studies show that structured curricula and qualified instructors enhance learning outcomes, emphasizing the importance of contextual adaptation and investment in local prison education.

Relevance to future reintegration

Participants reflected on the practical implications of correctional education for their lives after release, emphasizing both hopes and anticipated challenges. For many, the skills and literacy acquired through these programs represented tools they believed could support economic independence, emotional well-being, and societal reintegration. However, they recognized that education alone might not be sufficient; effective reintegration would also depend on structural support and social acceptance.

Some inmates viewed the vocational skills learned in prison as vital assets for post-release entrepreneurship and self-reliance. One female participant explained:

I think the skills I'm learning here will help me. I now know how to sew, and I want to open a shop when I leave. It gives me hope that I can survive without going back to crime. It's not just about learning something; it's about seeing a different future for yourself, even after the stigma of prison (P7, Female, 31 years).

Others highlighted the relevance of education but were equally aware of the challenges awaiting them upon reentry into society. Inadequate post-release support was seen as a major threat to sustaining rehabilitation gains. As one male inmate noted:

Yes, I am learning carpentry, and that is something I can use when I get out. But we need support too. If no one helps you after release, what you learned here may just end up wasted. People outside still see you as a prisoner, and it is hard to start again without tools or money (P8, Male, 36 years).

Participants also reflected non-economic benefits of education, such as enhanced family relationships and self-worth. A participant reflected on how literacy restored his identity as a father:

For the first time, I feel like I have a future. Before prison, I couldn't read. Now I can write letters to my children. That matters to me. I want to be a better father and show them I have changed. Even if I don't get a job right away, I am already doing something right by learning (P9, Male, 44 years).

These reflections underscore that correctional education in Southeast Nigeria contributes to personal development and family engagement, but structural support post-release is critical for sustaining gains. Globally, research suggests that without reintegration support, even well-designed programs may fail to translate into long-term benefits, highlighting the need for context-sensitive post-release strategies.

Theme 2: Perceived benefits of participation

Participants consistently highlighted how involvement in educational programs contributed to personal growth and skill development. These perceived benefits extended beyond academic knowledge and included improvements in self-concept, practical skills, and moral reasoning, as reported by the participants themselves.

Personal development and identity transformation

For many inmates, education served as a catalyst for internal reflection and purpose. A participant expressed how engaging in education reshaped his self-image:

Education changed my thinking. I used to feel useless. Now, when I read aloud or answer questions in class, I feel proud. It reminds me that I can still make something of myself. I'm no longer just some one who made a mistake (P6, Male, 43 years).

Similarly, some participants described education as a medium through which they reimagined their identity and future:

This is the first time I'm seeing myself as more than a criminal. When I study, I see hope. I'm not just passing time anymore; I'm building myself for a better life. It feels like I'm earning my second chance (P7, Female, 31 years).

Some participants emphasized the psychological and emotional benefits of educational participation:

Going to class gives me a reason to wake up every day. I used to just sleep all day, angry and bitter. Now I look forward to learning something new. It changed how I feel about myself and my time here (P8, Male, 36 years).

The findings illustrate that educational participation fosters psychological resilience and self-redefinition among inmates, which is essential for rehabilitation in the Nigerian context. Similar patterns are reported internationally, suggesting that personal growth and identity transformation are core benefits of prison

education across diverse settings.

Academic and vocational skills acquisition

Beyond personal transformation, participants acknowledged the acquisition of literacy and marketable skills. These were not only viewed as tools for survival post-release but also as pathways to social mobility. The participant explained:

I now know how to bake and read signboards. Before this, I couldn't even spell my name correctly. It's slow, but every lesson builds my confidence and makes me feel ready for the outside world. I'm not as scared as I used to be (P12, Female, 30 years).

Others noted the value of learning previously unimaginable skills:

The computer class has opened my eyes. I used to think computers were just for rich people. Now I know how to type and create documents. It's something I never imagined possible for me, and it makes me feel modern and capable (P10, Female, 28 years).

Vocational skills, such as welding, were seen as potential sources of livelihood:

When I joined the welding workshop, I knew nothing. But now I can weld a gate. That's something people pay for. That's how I plan to stay out of trouble after prison. I just need a chance and a few tools (P11, Male, 39 years).

Skill acquisition enhances employability potential and confidence, even in resource-limited Nigerian prisons. Globally, vocational and literacy programs are linked to social mobility and self-sufficiency, indicating that skill-based education is a universally valuable component of correctional programming.

Social and moral rehabilitation

A recurring theme was the role of education in promoting empathy, moral reasoning, and prosocial behavior. Moral and civic classes were especially highlighted as contributing to behavioral change. A participant reflected:

We have moral instruction every week, and it has helped me rethink how I treat people. I used to be very violent, but now I try to listen more and control my anger. Education made me see the damage I caused (P7, Female, 31 years).

One participant supported this view, explaining how education shaped group dynamics within the prison:

The classes help us respect each other. You can see the difference in behavior between those who attend and those who don't. Education softens you, makes you consider your actions. You begin to see others as human again (P13, Female, 42 years).

Similarly, a participant highlighted the restorative moral impact of correctional education on his familial relationships:

I was always stubborn, but learning about forgiveness and patience in our civic education class changed me. I now write letters of apology to my family. I want them to see a new me, someone who thinks before he acts (P14, Male, 38 years).

These narratives demonstrate the capacity of prison education to promote prosocial behavior and moral reasoning within Nigerian prisons, reinforcing the rehabilitative mission. Internationally, similar findings highlight the importance of integrating moral and civic education to support behavioral transformation and group cohesion.

Theme 3: Barriers to educational access

Despite the potential of education to promote reform, participants encountered several obstacles, including systemic deficiencies, infrastructural limitations, and unsupportive attitudes. These narratives reflect how structural, interpersonal, and policy-level factors shaped inmates' experiences of educational access.

Institutional and structural constraints

Inmates described structural barriers such as prison lockdowns, space limitations, and lack of learning materials. A participant captured the disruption caused by administrative inconsistencies:

We often miss classes because of lockdowns or staff shortages. Sometimes the officer who has the key doesn't show up, so we just sit in the cell all day, wasting time. It is depressing because we're eager to learn (P4, Female, 29 years).

Participant detailed the learning environment's inadequacy:

There's no real classroom. We sit on broken benches under a tree. When it rains, class is over. It makes it hard to take the lessons seriously, even when you want to (P8, Male, 36 years).

Another participant voiced concern over the acute shortage of basic learning tools:

Even when you want to learn, there are no books or writing materials. We share one textbook among five people. How are we supposed to succeed like that? It feels like they set us up to fail (P15, Male, 33 years).

Structural deficiencies such as space, materials, and administrative inconsistencies significantly hinder learning, reflecting broader systemic weaknesses in Southeast Nigerian prisons. Comparable barriers are reported in other low- and middle-income countries, underscoring that infrastructural investment is a key factor in effective correctional education globally.

Staff and peer attitudes

Participants also reported that negative attitudes from prison staff and fellow inmates discouraged participation. One participant explained:

Some prison staff mock us when we go for classes. They say it's a waste of time and that criminals can't change. It discourages people from joining. We need encouragement, not ridicule (P4, Female, 29 years).

Peer pressure and mistrust further undermined morale. One noted:

There's also jealousy from other inmates who don't attend. They think we are pretending to be good to get out early. It creates tension and sometimes fights, especially when officials favor the educated ones (P10, Female, 28 years).

Another offered a poignant reflection on institutional cynicism:

I had an officer tell me that learning was useless in here. It hurt because I was trying to do better. If the people in charge don't believe in us, how can we believe in ourselves? (P7, Female, 31 years).

Negative staff and peer attitudes further restrict participation and motivation, highlighting the need for institutional culture change in Nigerian prisons. International research similarly emphasizes that supportive staff and peer networks are crucial for fostering engagement and learning outcomes.

Policy and resource limitations

Policy inconsistency and poor funding were cited as major hindrances to sustainability. A participant lamented the lack of continuity:

The program started well when the NGO came, but after they left, everything collapsed. No one took over. That's the problem, there's no continuity in these prison projects. They start strong and die off (P15, Male, 33 years).

A participant raised concerns about instructor quality:

There are too few teachers, and they are not trained. One time, a religious volunteer was teaching math but didn't even know how to solve simple equations. It makes learning frustrating and confusing (P11, Male, 39 years).

Overall, inconsistent policy direction and limited funding continue to undermine the sustainability of prison education in Nigeria, reinforcing the point that meaningful learning outcomes depend on systemic support rather than isolated efforts. In contrast, evidence from well-resourced international contexts shows that stable policy frameworks and adequate investment enable continuity, broaden participation, and strengthen program impact.

Taken together, the participants' narratives demonstrate that barriers to educational access are multi-dimensional, spanning infrastructural limitations, interpersonal dynamics, and institutional bottlenecks. Importantly, these insights emerged directly from inmates' lived experiences rather than researcher assumptions, underscoring the need to prioritize their voices when designing and refining correctional education programs. Addressing these structural and procedural gaps is essential for transforming prison education from a fragmented initiative into a functional rehabilitative tool.

Discussion

The findings of this study reveal nuanced insights into inmates' perceptions of educational services in correctional facilities in Southeast Nigeria. Three major themes emerged: perceived availability and relevance of educational services, perceived benefits of participation, and barriers to educational access, each of which provides critical reflection on both the promise and limitations of correctional education within the Nigerian penal context.

Participants reported limited awareness and inequitable access to educational programs, highlighting a disconnect between institutional claims of educational provision and the lived realities of inmates. Access was often mediated through informal networks and personal initiative, rather than through structured orientation or policy-driven outreach. This aligns with Ogunode et al. (2023), who emphasized that policy frameworks often overstate educational availability without attending to issues of implementation and inclusivity.

Curriculum content was described as rudimentary, with limited progression beyond basic literacy or vocational skill acquisition. While moral and religious instruction was offered, the perceived lack of academic depth and continuity in pathways frustrated inmates seeking formal qualifications. This reflects Uche et al.'s (2015) critique that correctional education in Nigeria frequently lacks scaffolding mechanisms for long-term learning, thus limiting its rehabilitative potential. The findings also align with international evidence (Obetta, 2010) suggesting that the absence of well-structured curricula hinders meaningful inmate development and reintegration.

Despite structural and content limitations, many inmates described educational engagement as transformative. Participants consistently articulated how education contributed to personal development, identity reconstruction, and increased self-worth. These findings align with theories of desistance from crime, which suggest that identity change and self-efficacy are crucial to rehabilitation (Bushway & Paternoster, 2013).

Vocational training and literacy acquisition were viewed not only as tools for post-release employment but also as psychological anchors that provided inmates with a renewed sense of purpose. This finding aligns with research by Davis et al. (2013), which demonstrated that correctional education has a significant impact on reducing recidivism and improving employment outcomes after release. Moreover, participants emphasized non-economic outcomes such as moral reflection, social empathy, and improved familial relationships, dimensions that are often underrepresented in quantitative evaluations of prison education but are critical to holistic rehabilitation. Although participants could not comment directly on post-release outcomes such as recidivism or employment, these international findings provide a comparative benchmark rather than evidence of local impact.

Participants identified significant structural, institutional, and attitudinal barriers that undermined educational access and quality. Issues such as prison lockdowns, lack of classrooms, shortages of teaching materials, and poorly trained staff reflect systemic underinvestment and policy neglect. These findings reinforce previous critiques of correctional education in Nigeria, where lack of political will and poor funding have

resulted in inconsistent program delivery (Ogunode et al., 2023; Ogunode & Sam-Leeloo, 2025). Negative attitudes from both staff and fellow inmates further discouraged participation. The internal prison culture often delegitimized educational engagement, with some inmates reporting ridicule and mistrust. These findings mirror global evidence (Costelloe & Warner, 2014) that prison subcultures may perceive education as inauthentic or manipulative, thereby reinforcing barriers to uptake. Notably, these context-specific barriers emerged distinctly through the phenomenological approach, which foregrounded inmates' lived experiences and revealed informal access pathways, attitudes, and operational realities that are often invisible in policy-level assessments.

Perhaps most concerning was the fragility of program continuity, particularly when tied to external NGO interventions. In the case of the National Open University of Nigeria (NOUN), participants perceived that while the institution provides formal support for educational programming, ongoing delivery remains heavily dependent on NGO resources and coordination. Once external support ceased, many programs collapsed, highlighting the need for stronger institutional commitment and integration of educational programs into the core prison system to ensure sustainability. This underscores the importance of developing more integrated and institutionalized approaches within the Nigerian Correctional Service.

The findings suggest that while correctional education in Southeast Nigeria holds substantial promise, its impact is undermined by communication gaps, inadequate infrastructure, weak policy implementation, and sociocultural barriers within the prison system. The transformative potential observed among participating inmates underscores the importance of expanding, formalizing, and sustaining these educational services. A more strategic and inclusive approach grounded in both policy reform and institutional commitment is essential to ensure that correctional education achieves its full rehabilitative potential.

These findings are aptly interpreted through the lens of the capability approach, which emphasizes individuals' real freedoms to achieve lives they have reason to value (Sen, 1999; Nussbaum, 2011). The lived experiences of inmates illustrate a profound disparity between the formal availability of educational programs and inmates' actual capabilities to access and benefit from them. As Robeyns (2005) posits, the mere provision of resources such as education is insufficient unless individuals possess the conversion factors (personal, social, and environmental) needed to utilize them meaningfully. In this context, institutional inefficiencies, inadequate infrastructure, staff apathy, and negative peer attitudes serve as significant barriers to conversion, thereby limiting inmates' ability to transform educational offerings into functional opportunities. However, where access was possible and support structures were minimally in place, inmates described transformative experiences that extended beyond skill acquisition to encompass identity reconstruction, enhanced self-worth, and future-oriented aspirations. This aligns with Walker and Unterhalter's (2007) assertion that education within marginalized spaces should aim not only at delivering knowledge but at expanding human capabilities, fostering autonomy, agency, and dignity. Thus, the capability approach helps illuminate how correctional education can either promote or inhibit human flourishing, depending on how equitably it is structured, communicated, and supported.

Taken together, these insights highlight distinctive features of correctional education in Southeast Nigeria such as informal access networks, literacy-linked exclusion, and NGO-dependent program continuity that are not widely reported in studies from better-resourced regions. These context-specific nuances became visible precisely because the phenomenological approach centered inmates' subjective experiences. This contrasts with prison education systems in Europe and North America, where structured program delivery, formal orientation, and stable institutional support reduce reliance on informal networks and ensure more equitable access, highlighting the specificity of the Southeast Nigerian context.

Implications for correctional education practice and policy

The findings of this study carry significant implications for the practice and policy of correctional education in Nigeria. Participants' accounts revealed that access to educational programs is often limited, uneven, and dependent on informal networks rather than structured orientation or policy-driven outreach. This highlights a critical need for correctional institutions to improve communication, ensure equitable access, and develop transparent procedures for program enrollment (Ogunode et al., 2023; Uche et al., 2024a). Policies

should mandate clear dissemination of information to all inmates, including those with low literacy or limited social connections, to prevent systemic exclusion of marginalized subpopulations (UNESCO, 2022).

Curriculum content and delivery also emerged as important considerations. Participants reported that educational programs were often rudimentary, lacked structured progression, and did not align with diverse post-release aspirations. These findings underscore the need for curriculum reform that incorporates both academic and vocational skill development, ensures progression beyond basic literacy, and provides practical relevance to post-release life (Uche et al., 2023; Akpan et al., 2023). Globally, well-structured and resourced prison education programs have been shown to support inmate development and reduce recidivism (Davis et al., 2013; Costelloe & Warner, 2014; Hawley et al., 2013), suggesting that aligning Nigerian programs with international best practices could enhance outcomes.

The transformative potential of education reported by participants improvements in self-concept, identity reconstruction, and future orientation emphasizes the importance of sustaining engagement and support (Bushway & Paternoster, 2013; Walker & Unterhalter, 2007). Correctional education policy should prioritize continuity of programs, adequate staffing, and provision of learning materials to ensure that these psychological and skill-based gains are not undermined by structural constraints (Ogunode et al., 2023; Uche, 2023). The collapse of programs following NGO withdrawal, as described by participants, points to a need for institutionalization of educational initiatives within the Nigerian Correctional Service (Akpan et al., 2023).

Although participants did not explicitly mention social work, the study suggests that structured support mechanisms could enhance program accessibility and effectiveness. Future research could explore the role of social work or other supportive services in facilitating equitable access, individualized learning pathways, and post-release continuity (Aliyu et al., 2017; Uche, 2024). Such interventions could complement existing correctional education programs and further strengthen rehabilitative outcomes.

Taken together, these findings indicate that effective correctional education in Nigeria requires policy reform, strategic resourcing, and institutional commitment. By improving program accessibility, enhancing curriculum relevance, and supporting sustained engagement, correctional education can more fully realize its rehabilitative potential, supporting the broader goals of social reintegration, personal development, and societal benefit (Davis et al., 2013; UNESCO, 2022).

Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, several key recommendations are proposed to enhance the effectiveness and inclusivity of correctional education in Nigeria. Firstly, there is an urgent need for correctional authorities, in collaboration with the Nigerian Correctional Service and relevant ministries, to institutionalize structured orientation programs for newly incarcerated individuals. These programs should include comprehensive and accessible information on available educational and vocational opportunities, ensuring that even those with low literacy or limited social networks are not excluded.

Secondly, prison education programs should be expanded and standardized to allow progression beyond basic literacy. This calls for the recruitment and training of qualified educators, the provision of adequate learning materials, and the inclusion of diverse vocational and technical programs that align with current labor market demands. Moreover, to address infrastructural limitations, correctional facilities should be equipped with dedicated learning spaces and tools that support practical learning, such as sewing machines, computers, and carpentry tools.

In addition, forensic social workers and correctional educators should collaborate to develop individualized education and rehabilitation plans tailored to each inmate's skills, interests, and post-release aspirations. These plans should be regularly reviewed and aligned with reintegration goals. Furthermore, reintegration support structures must be strengthened through multi-sectoral partnerships involving government agencies, NGOs, religious bodies, and private sector actors. These partnerships can provide post-release mentorship, job placement, micro-financing, and continued education pathways.

Finally, there is a need for policy reform and sustainability planning. Correctional education should be integrated into broader national education and prison reform frameworks, with adequate budgetary allocations and monitoring mechanisms. Forensic social workers must take on more active roles in policy advocacy, research translation, and the promotion of human rights-based approaches within the justice system to ensure long-term impact.

Research constraints

Despite the valuable insights generated, this study is not without limitations. First, the research was geographically limited to three correctional facilities in Southeast Nigeria. While this region offers important contextual relevance, the findings may not be generalizable to other parts of Nigeria with differing administrative structures, cultural dynamics, and correctional education policies. Future research could expand the scope to include a broader representation of correctional institutions across the country for more comprehensive insights.

Secondly, the study faced institutional constraints that limited access to official records or longitudinal data on educational outcomes post-release. As such, it was not possible to directly evaluate the long-term impact of educational participation on recidivism or reintegration success. Additionally, given the security-sensitive environment of correctional facilities, some participants may have withheld sensitive opinions, affecting the richness of the data.

Finally, the study did not account for variations in educational programming by gender or sentence length, both of which may influence inmates' engagement and perspectives. Future studies could adopt a mixed-methods design and explore intersectional variables such as age, gender, and sentence duration to deepen understanding of correctional education outcomes.

Conclusion

This study has illuminated the complex realities of educational service delivery within correctional facilities in Southeast Nigeria, revealing both its transformative potential and its structural limitations. While inmates largely view education as a tool for personal growth, identity reconstruction, and reintegration, their ability to access and benefit from these programs is hindered by systemic inequities, institutional inertia, and resource constraints. The study's findings underscore the central role of forensic social workers in bridging these gaps through advocacy, individualized rehabilitation planning, psychosocial support, and reintegration coordination. Their involvement is critical in transforming correctional institutions from punitive spaces into rehabilitative environments that foster genuine reform and social inclusion.

Ultimately, for correctional education to fulfill its rehabilitative promise in Nigeria, it must be underpinned by inclusive policies, adequate infrastructure, well-trained personnel, and sustained multi-stakeholder engagement. Only then can education truly serve as a pathway to dignity, empowerment, and meaningful reintegration for incarcerated individuals.

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