Exploring the Perceptions of Student Prisoners on Challenges with Supervisors in Prison Education

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Abstract

This study examines the challenges faced by incarcerated students in their interactions with study supervisors within prison education programs in Namibia. Using a qualitative design and an interpretive paradigm, semi-structured interviews with 12 male participants were analyzed thematically to uncover key barriers in the student-supervisor dynamic. Findings highlight systemic issues, including limited technological access, communication barriers, and insufficient supervisory support, which hinder effective learning and engagement. Participants emphasized the psychological impact of delayed feedback, restricted access to study materials, and a lack of supervisor understanding of educational needs. These insights underscore the need for enhanced training for supervisors, improved communication infrastructure, and equitable access to digital resources to create supportive learning environments in correctional facilities. By addressing these barriers, the study contributes to improving educational outcomes and supports broader rehabilitative efforts for incarcerated learners.

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INTRODUCTION

Prison education plays a critical role in rehabilitating and reintegrating incarcerated individuals into society. Globally, it has been recognized as an effective mechanism to reduce recidivism, improve post-release employability, and enhance inmates' social and psychological well-being (Davis et al., 2013; McCorkel & DeFina, 2019). By equipping inmates with the necessary skills and knowledge, educational programs help them navigate societal challenges and rebuild their lives after release. In Namibia, the Namibian Correctional Services (NCS) underscores the importance of prison education as part of its broader strategy to emphasize rehabilitation over punitive measures (Fredericks et al., 2021).

Namibia's correctional education initiatives align with the global trend of integrating educational programs into prison systems as a means of fostering community reintegration. Research conducted at Windhoek Correctional Facility highlights the need for individualized learning plans tailored to inmates' prior education, skills, and aspirations, demonstrating the potential for rehabilitation through education (Sisinyize et al., 2023). However, despite such progress, systemic

barriers, including resource constraints, overcrowding, and lack of trained educators, continue to impede the success of these programs (Chikadzi, 2017). These challenges echo broader global concerns, where correctional facilities struggle to balance security priorities with the provision of quality education.

The transformative impact of prison education has been widely documented. Studies indicate that inmates who participate in educational programs are 28% to 43% less likely to reoffend compared to their non-participating peers (Fantuzzo, 2022). Educational attainment in prison fosters personal growth, builds self-esteem, and reduces the stigma of incarceration, ultimately enabling inmates to reintegrate into society as productive citizens (Mukasheva et al., 2024). These outcomes underscore the critical role of correctional education in addressing the dual objectives of rehabilitation and societal safety.

Despite its established benefits, the implementation of prison education in Namibia faces significant challenges that undermine its effectiveness. Institutional barriers, such as insufficient funding, lack of infrastructure, and inadequate educational resources, limit inmates' access to learning opportunities (Mafilika & Marongwe, 2024; Spaulding, 2011). Situational factors, including overcrowded facilities and restrictive prison environments, further complicate the delivery of education (Franich & Martinovic, 2024). These systemic issues are exacerbated by the digital divide, where limited access to technology hampers inmates' ability to engage with modern educational platforms (Adeyeye, 2019).

A particularly critical issue within Namibia's correctional education system is the relationship between student prisoners and their study supervisors. Supervisors play an essential role in guiding, supporting, and motivating inmates, but logistical constraints and communication barriers often hinder effective supervision (Wilson & Pool, 2024). For example, the geographical distance between correctional facilities and educational institutions limits face-to-face interactions, leading to delays in feedback and decreased academic engagement (Batchelder & Koski, 2002). Moreover, supervisors who lack cultural sensitivity or expertise in inmates' fields of study may inadvertently create additional obstacles to academic success (Mahoney & Chowdhury, 2021).

These challenges are further compounded by socioeconomic and systemic inequities. Marginalized groups disproportionately represented in correctional populations often face greater difficulties accessing education due to preexisting disadvantages, such as lower educational attainment and social stigma (Evans et al., 2018). Addressing these issues requires a comprehensive approach that combines policy reform, resource allocation, and stakeholder collaboration to create an equitable and effective prison education system.

This study contributes to the growing discourse on prison education by focusing specifically on the perceptions of student prisoners regarding their interactions with study supervisors within the Namibian context. While existing research has explored the general benefits and challenges of correctional education, limited attention has been given to the role of supervisors in shaping inmates' academic experiences. This study fills this gap by examining the systemic and interpersonal dynamics that influence supervision in prison education, providing insights that can inform the design of more effective support systems.

This research offers a nuanced understanding of the challenges faced by student prisoners and their supervisors by highlighting the unique barriers to education in correctional settings, including communication difficulties, technological limitations, and restricted access to resources. Additionally, the study contributes to the broader theoretical framework on correctional education by exploring how power dynamics, cultural sensitivity, and systemic inequities shape the educational experiences of incarcerated learners (McCorkel & DeFina, 2019; Shoemaker, 2017). The findings have practical implications for improving supervisory practices, enhancing educational outcomes, and promoting successful reintegration of inmates into society.

Research Objectives and Questions

The primary objective of this study is to explore the perceptions of student prisoners regarding the challenges they encounter with their study supervisors in the context of prison education. By investigating the lived experiences and perspectives of incarcerated learners, the study aims to identify recurring themes and issues that hinder effective supervision and academic engagement. The findings are intended to inform strategies for enhancing support systems and improving educational outcomes within correctional facilities. The current study is guided by the following research questions to achieve these objectives.

1. What are the perceptions of student prisoners regarding the challenges they face with their study supervisors in the context of prison education?
2. How do these perceptions inform the development of strategies to enhance supervisory support and improve educational outcomes in correctional settings?
3. What systemic and interpersonal factors influence the effectiveness of supervision in prison education?

Theoretical Background

The Role of Prison Education in Rehabilitation

The rehabilitative potential of prison education has been extensively documented in academic literature. Studies emphasize its role in reducing recidivism, improving employability, and fostering personal growth among inmates (Bozick et al., 2018; Davis et al., 2013). Correctional education programs that integrate life skills training and vocational education have been particularly effective in preparing inmates for reintegration into society (Mukasheva et al., 2024; Novo-Molinero et al., 2024). In Namibia, initiatives such as vocational training and individualized learning plans have shown promise in equipping inmates with the tools needed for successful rehabilitation (Sisinyize et al., 2023).

However, the implementation of these programs often faces significant obstacles. Institutional barriers, including inadequate funding and lack of infrastructure, restrict access to quality education in many correctional facilities (Chikadzi, 2017; Spaulding, 2011). These challenges are compounded by situational factors such as overcrowding and restrictive prison environments, which limit the availability of learning resources and opportunities for individualized attention (Franich & Martinovic, 2024; Mafilika & Marongwe, 2024).

The Role of Study Supervisors

Study supervisors play a critical role in facilitating the educational experiences of incarcerated learners. They provide guidance, academic support, and mentorship,

which are essential for fostering a conducive learning environment (Barton et al., 2024; Wilson & Pool, 2024). Effective supervision has been linked to improved academic outcomes, increased motivation, and enhanced self-efficacy among inmates (Zamiri & Esmaeili, 2024). Supervisors who demonstrate cultural sensitivity and empathy can help mitigate the stigma of incarceration and create a supportive educational atmosphere (Mahoney & Chowdhury, 2021).

Despite their importance, supervisors often face challenges that hinder their ability to provide effective support. Logistical constraints, such as geographical distance and limited communication tools, impede interactions between supervisors and inmates (Batchelder & Koski, 2002). Additionally, supervisors who lack expertise in inmates' fields of study or understanding of their unique needs may struggle to build meaningful relationships with their students (Wilson & Pool, 2024). Addressing these issues requires targeted training programs and the development of innovative communication strategies to enhance supervisory practices.

Technological and Logistical Challenges

The integration of technology into prison education has introduced new opportunities and challenges. While digital platforms can expand access to educational resources, the digital divide within correctional facilities limits their effectiveness. In Namibia, security regulations often restrict access to computers and the internet, creating barriers to e-learning and digital literacy (Adeyeye, 2019; Pulido, 2023). These technological limitations are exacerbated by the lack of training programs for both inmates and educators, further hindering the adoption of modern educational tools (Franich & Martinovic, 2024).

Logistical constraints also pose significant challenges to prison education. Overcrowded facilities, restrictive schedules, and procedural delays complicate the delivery of educational programs (Mafilika & Marongwe, 2024). For example, delays in enrollment, transcript processing, and credit transfers can disrupt inmates' academic progress and reduce their motivation to pursue further education (Comer, 2024). Addressing these challenges requires strategic investments in infrastructure, policy reform, and stakeholder collaboration to create a more supportive educational environment.

Systemic Inequities and Marginalization

Systemic inequities within the criminal justice system disproportionately affect marginalized groups, exacerbating the barriers to education faced by incarcerated individuals. Socioeconomic disparities, racial inequalities, and cultural differences influence inmates' access to educational opportunities and their overall academic engagement (Batchelder & Pippert, 2002; Evans et al., 2018). For instance, language barriers and cultural misunderstandings often hinder the participation of non-native speakers in educational programs (Croux et al., 2019). These issues highlight the need for inclusive and culturally sensitive approaches to correctional education.

The stigma of incarceration further compounds these challenges. Many inmates experience self-stigma and negative perceptions of their educational capabilities, which can deter them from participating in academic programs (Tzatsis et al., 2019). Supervisors and educators play a crucial role in addressing these psychological barriers by fostering a positive and supportive learning environment (Farley & Pike,

2018). By prioritizing equity and inclusion, correctional education programs can empower inmates to overcome systemic barriers and achieve their academic goals.

Collaborative Approaches to Prison Education

Collaboration between correctional facilities, educational institutions, and community organizations is essential for addressing the challenges of prison education. Partnerships can facilitate the provision of high-quality learning materials, vocational training, and mentorship programs, enabling incarcerated learners to achieve their full potential (Atuase & Filson, 2024). In Namibia, such collaborations could enhance the availability and accessibility of educational resources, creating a more equitable and effective system.

Research also highlights the importance of stakeholder engagement in driving systemic change. By involving policymakers, educators, and community leaders in the development of prison education programs, correctional facilities can create frameworks that address the unique needs of student prisoners (Díaz-León et al., 2024). These efforts must prioritize the integration of life skills training, emotional education, and cultural sensitivity to prepare inmates for successful reintegration into society.

Prison education serves as a powerful tool for rehabilitation and reintegration, offering incarcerated individuals the opportunity to transform their lives and contribute to society. However, systemic barriers, logistical challenges, and resource constraints continue to hinder its effectiveness in Namibia. This study seeks to address these issues by exploring the perceptions of student prisoners regarding their interactions with study supervisors, providing insights that can inform the design of more effective support systems. By addressing the identified challenges and promoting collaborative approaches, Namibia's correctional education system can achieve its dual objectives of rehabilitation and societal safety.

METHOD

Study Design

This study employed a qualitative research approach within an interpretive paradigm, emphasizing the exploration of lived experiences and perceptions. The qualitative design was chosen for its capacity to provide rich, nuanced insights into the challenges faced by student prisoners in their interactions with study supervisors (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018). The interpretive paradigm was particularly suited to this research as it prioritizes understanding the subjective realities of participants, allowing the researcher to delve into the complexities of their experiences (Flick, 2018).

The thematic analysis methodology was adopted to identify recurring patterns and themes in the data. This approach facilitated a comprehensive examination of participants' narratives, providing a structured yet flexible framework for understanding their perspectives (Rouhani et al., 2024).

Participants

The study involved 12 male inmates enrolled in educational programs within a correctional facility in Namibia. Participants were purposefully selected to ensure a homogenous group with shared experiences of studying while incarcerated. This selection criterion enabled a focused exploration of the research question, as all

participants faced similar constraints and challenges related to their academic endeavors.

Participants were aged between 20 and 50 years and represented diverse educational backgrounds, ranging from basic literacy programs to advanced vocational and higher education courses. This diversity provided a broader understanding of the challenges across varying levels of educational engagement. All participants voluntarily agreed to participate in the study after being informed of its purpose, procedures, and their rights as participants.

Data Collection

Data collection was conducted through semi-structured interviews, lasting approximately 30 minutes per participant. Semi-structured interviews were chosen for their ability to balance guided inquiry with flexibility, allowing participants to elaborate on their experiences while ensuring that the research objectives were addressed (Flick, 2018).

A detailed interview protocol was developed to guide the discussions (see Appendix 1). Questions focused on participants' perceptions of their supervisors, the support they received, and the barriers they encountered in pursuing education while incarcerated. Probing questions were used to encourage deeper reflection and to clarify ambiguous responses. To minimize bias, the interviewer maintained a neutral tone and allowed participants to express their thoughts freely.

Interviews were audio-recorded with participants' consent to ensure accuracy and preserve the authenticity of their narratives. To further validate the responses, participants were asked to clarify or expand on their answers during the interviews. This iterative approach helped ensure that the data accurately reflected participants' viewpoints (Geng, 2024).

Following the interviews, a supplementary research questionnaire with the same set of questions was distributed to participants. Although the results of the questionnaire are not included in this paper, they provided an additional layer of validation for the qualitative data collected through interviews.

Data Processing and Transcription

The recorded interviews were transcribed verbatim by a professional transcriber, ensuring a precise and accurate representation of participants' responses. Transcription played a crucial role in preserving the nuances of the conversations, including tone, pauses, and emphasis, which are essential for qualitative analysis (Flick, 2018).

Once transcribed, the researcher reviewed the transcripts thoroughly to familiarize themselves with the data. This process involved multiple readings of the transcripts to identify initial impressions and recurring ideas, forming the foundation for subsequent analysis.

Data Analysis

Thematic analysis was employed to systematically analyze the interview data. This method is widely used in qualitative research to identify, analyze, and report patterns or themes within datasets (Nowell et al., 2017). The following steps were undertaken during the analysis.

1. Data Familiarization: The researcher immersed themselves in the data by reading and re-reading the transcripts. Initial notes were taken to capture preliminary observations and ideas for potential themes (Nowell et al., 2017).
2. Generating Initial Codes: Segments of text relevant to the research questions were systematically coded. Coding was performed manually, allowing the researcher to engage closely with the data and identify meaningful patterns.
3. Searching for Themes: Codes were collated into broader themes that represented recurring patterns in the data. For instance, challenges related to communication, access to resources, and technological barriers emerged as prominent themes. A thematic map was created to visualize the relationships between codes and themes.
4. Reviewing Themes: Themes were refined to ensure they accurately reflected the data. This iterative process involved revisiting the transcripts to confirm that the themes were supported by the evidence and aligned with the research objectives.
5. Defining and Naming Themes: Each theme was clearly defined and given a descriptive name that encapsulated its essence. Detailed descriptions of the themes were developed, highlighting their significance in the context of the research.
6. Producing the Report: The finalized themes were used to construct a narrative that captured participants' experiences and perspectives. Quotes from the transcripts were included to illustrate key findings and enhance the credibility of the analysis.

By employing this step-by-step approach, the researcher was able to move beyond mere description and provide an in-depth interpretation of the underlying patterns in the data (Kogen, 2024).

Ethical Statement

Participants provided informed consent after being fully briefed about the study's purpose, procedures, and their rights. Additionally, confidentiality was maintained by anonymizing participants' identities in the transcripts and the final report. Audio recordings and transcripts were securely stored, accessible only to the research team. Participants were informed of their right to withdraw from the study at any time without repercussions.

Given the sensitive nature of the research, particular attention was paid to minimizing potential distress among participants. The researcher was trained to recognize signs of discomfort and to provide appropriate support or referrals if necessary. Establishing trust and rapport with participants was prioritized to ensure that they felt comfortable sharing their experiences.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Technological Barriers

Participants highlighted significant technological barriers that impeded their academic progress while incarcerated. The challenges were primarily attributed to restricted access to necessary digital tools, insufficient digital literacy, and institutional policies that prioritized security over educational support. These issues are consistent with previous research, underscoring the systemic challenges faced by incarcerated learners in a digitally driven educational landscape. One participant described their struggle with technological skills:

> *"I had a little bit of a challenge because of this issue of laptops, technology of computers since I never knew computers. I came to learn the computer in prison."*

This lack of foundational digital literacy reflects the limited opportunities many incarcerated individuals had prior to their imprisonment. Pulido (2023) and Adeyeye (2019) noted that the digital divide is especially pronounced in correctional settings, where pre-incarceration disparities in education and technology use are exacerbated by the restrictions within prisons. Without adequate prior experience, incarcerated learners must navigate a steep learning curve while attempting to engage with academic programs that rely heavily on digital platforms.

In addition to skills gaps, participants also reported frustration with the restricted availability of technological tools. Shared access to computers within the prison was described as insufficient to meet the needs of all learners, with many facing delays and scheduling conflicts. One participant explained:

"We are restricted from accessing the internet directly, which makes it hard to complete some assignments or communicate efficiently with our lecturers."

This lack of access creates a bottleneck that hampers students' ability to complete assignments on time or participate fully in their educational programs. The prioritization of security over educational needs often results in limited infrastructure, as prisons fear that greater technological access might compromise institutional control (Rosmilawati, 2020). These restrictions create a significant disadvantage for incarcerated learners compared to their peers in the general population, further widening the gap in educational equity.

Institutional constraints also manifested in the form of security policies that prohibited or severely limited internet access. Participants noted that while they occasionally received study materials or guidance through mediated means—such as prison officers facilitating email communication with lecturers—the process was slow and cumbersome. One participant observed:

"Whenever we need something or some clarity, we send our education officers, and they send a security officer to collect for us. This delays everything, especially when materials are urgent."

The reliance on intermediaries not only delayed access to critical resources but also introduced opportunities for miscommunication, as the nuances of a student's needs might not always be conveyed accurately. Batchelder and Koski (2002) similarly found that prison education systems often suffer from logistical inefficiencies, which undermine the ability of students to effectively engage with their studies.

Participants also highlighted the psychological toll of these technological limitations. One noted that their inability to communicate directly with their lecturers or access real-time resources *"puts us at a psychological problem."* This sentiment reflects the broader challenges of navigating educational aspirations in an environment that systematically restricts access to critical tools. Bolliger and Halupa (2012) emphasized that feelings of isolation, compounded by technological barriers, can detract from students' motivation and overall academic performance.

While some participants reported eventual success in acquiring basic digital skills, their progress was often achieved through considerable self-teaching and perseverance rather than structured support. The absence of digital literacy training within prisons is a missed opportunity to bridge the gap in technological competencies and prepare incarcerated learners for the demands of modern education

and the workforce. One participant who successfully obtained multiple qualifications despite these barriers described their journey as challenging and noted the limitations of their learning experience due to the lack of structured technological support.

These findings point to the systemic nature of technological inequities in prison education. The institutional emphasis on security often leads to a lack of investment in digital infrastructure, including computers, secure internet access, and related resources. As Farley (2022) observed, the prioritization of control over rehabilitation can stifle educational initiatives, even when these programs have been shown to reduce recidivism and support reintegration.

Addressing these technological barriers requires targeted interventions. For instance, correctional facilities could implement secure e-library systems that allow inmates to access academic resources without compromising security protocols. Partnerships with educational institutions could also provide the necessary infrastructure and expertise to improve digital access within prisons. These collaborations could facilitate the creation of monitored internet access programs, enabling students to engage with digital learning platforms in a secure yet effective manner.

Furthermore, the integration of digital literacy training into prison education programs is critical. Tailored workshops or courses that teach inmates the fundamentals of computer use, email communication, and navigating online resources could significantly reduce the learning curve and improve educational outcomes. Adeyeye (2019) emphasized that programs designed to build both academic content knowledge and technological competencies are crucial for the success of incarcerated learners in the modern educational landscape. Prison staff must also be trained to support technological initiatives. One participant noted the indifference of some staff members toward education, stating:

"Some officers who were assigned to assist us at the education section could not understand what the importance of studying is."

Training correctional officers to recognize the rehabilitative value of education and their role in facilitating access to digital tools could foster a more supportive environment for learning. As Eizadirad and Chambers (2023) noted, collaboration between educational staff and correctional officers is key to the success of prison education programs. Finally, policies should balance security concerns with educational goals. Restrictive policies that severely limit technological access often hinder rather than help rehabilitation efforts. By adopting evidence-based reforms that integrate secure technology solutions, prisons can create a more equitable and effective educational environment.

The technological barriers faced by incarcerated learners in this study are emblematic of broader systemic issues within prison education. Limited access to digital tools, insufficient training, and institutional constraints collectively hinder learners' academic progress and rehabilitation potential. Addressing these challenges through targeted investments in infrastructure, training, and policy reforms is essential for empowering incarcerated students to achieve their educational and personal goals. These efforts not only benefit the individuals involved but also contribute to broader societal outcomes, such as reduced recidivism and enhanced post-release employability.

Communication Barriers

Participants in the study consistently identified communication barriers as a significant challenge, particularly in their interactions with supervisors, lecturers, and educational institutions. The constraints of the prison environment severely limited their ability to establish timely and effective communication, resulting in delays, misunderstandings, and a sense of isolation. These issues were amplified by the reliance on intermediaries and restrictive institutional policies that prioritized security over educational needs. One participant captured the essence of this problem, stating:

"Because of our environment, it is very difficult for us to always have contact with outside, with the lecturers or with the institution, so we have to work through our education officers here in the facility."

The indirect nature of these communication processes created inefficiencies. Requests for assistance or materials often had to pass through several layers of intermediaries, including education officers and security staff, before reaching their intended recipients. This system was prone to delays, as another participant explained:

"Whenever we need something or some form of clarity, we send the education officers, and they send a security officer to collect for us. This delays everything, especially when materials are urgent."

These logistical inefficiencies hindered the ability of incarcerated learners to engage with their studies fully. Batchelder and Koski (2002) similarly observed that such indirect processes can lead to significant bottlenecks in prison education systems, undermining the timeliness and quality of support provided to learners.

Delays in supervisor responses emerged as a particularly pressing issue. Several participants expressed frustration with the time it took to receive feedback or guidance from their supervisors. One noted:

"The supervisor… when it comes to communication, sometimes they don't respond on time when you need assistance pertaining to your assignments."

The physical separation between students and supervisors further exacerbated these delays. For example, one participant reported:

"Because I was staying 300 kilometers from this place where I am, they took two years without seeing me. We used to only communicate by telephone."

Such prolonged periods without face-to-face interaction or real-time communication hindered the development of a supportive and collaborative educational relationship. Research by Watts (2010) and Bolliger and Halupa (2012) has emphasized that delayed feedback and limited interaction in distance education contexts can lead to feelings of isolation and disconnection, ultimately affecting student motivation and academic performance. These challenges are particularly pronounced in correctional settings, where structural barriers amplify the difficulties inherent in distance education.

For many participants, the prison's strict schedules and policies compounded these issues. Communication was restricted to specific hours, which often conflicted with the availability of lecturers or supervisors. As one participant explained:

"Here you are not with the phone by that time because we always have to wait during the day, maybe from 8 or 9 o'clock when the prison opens until 3 o'clock. You can just operate within that time."

This limited window of opportunity created significant challenges, especially when lecturers were unavailable during those hours. Additionally, participants were often unable to access personal communication devices, such as mobile phones or email accounts, further restricting their ability to engage directly with educators. Lahm (2009) and Bolliger and Halupa (2012) found similar systemic barriers in correctional facilities, where the prioritization of security often limits access to communication tools and resources, leaving students feeling unsupported.

The psychological impact of these communication barriers was evident in the participants' accounts. One described the stress and frustration caused by delayed responses:

"It puts us at a psychological problem. You feel like you're not being supported, and it affects your motivation to continue."

This sense of abandonment was echoed by several participants, who felt that the lack of timely and consistent communication diminished their academic potential and personal growth. Bolliger and Halupa (2012) highlighted that such feelings of isolation and frustration are common in distance education, especially when communication barriers persist. In the prison context, these challenges are magnified by the systemic constraints of the environment, which limit opportunities for direct engagement and mentorship.

While most participants expressed dissatisfaction with the communication processes, a few reported more positive experiences with responsive supervisors. One participant noted:

"All the time I called my supervisor, he would answer my calls. He responds to my emails as soon as possible. For me, I did not experience many challenges despite being in prison."

This contrast underscores the variability in communication experiences, which often depended on the practices of individual supervisors rather than systemic support. Wilson and Pool (2024) emphasized that effective supervision is critical for academic success, particularly in distance education contexts where personal interaction is limited. The findings suggest that while some supervisors made efforts to maintain regular and responsive communication, these efforts were not universally implemented or supported by institutional policies.

The reliance on intermediaries further complicated communication, as it often introduced opportunities for misinterpretation or oversight. Participants described instances where their requests for materials or clarification were either delayed or misunderstood, resulting in additional frustration and wasted time. As one participant explained:

"You might find that the officer would say no, there is no need for you to go [to collect materials], and also the other thing at the institution side… there was problems. You will send that email to the lecturer, and you would get no response."

These experiences highlight the importance of streamlining communication processes to ensure that incarcerated learners can access the support and resources

they need in a timely manner. Batchelder and Koski (2002) noted that the lack of direct communication channels often undermines the effectiveness of prison education programs, leaving students feeling disconnected from their educational institutions.

Addressing these communication barriers requires a multifaceted approach. First, correctional facilities should invest in secure communication platforms, such as supervised video conferencing or prison-based email systems, to facilitate direct and timely interactions between students and educators. Participants consistently emphasized the need for more efficient communication tools, which could reduce delays and improve the quality of their educational experiences.

Second, training for supervisors and prison staff is essential to ensure that they understand the unique challenges faced by incarcerated learners. One participant observed:

> *"Some officers who were assigned to assist us at the education section could not understand what the importance of studying is."*

Educating staff about the rehabilitative value of education and their role in facilitating communication could help foster a more supportive environment. Eizadirad and Chambers (2023) noted that collaboration between educational staff and correctional officers is crucial for the success of prison education programs, as it helps bridge the gap between institutional policies and the needs of students.

Finally, policies should be revised to prioritize educational communication alongside security concerns. Allowing incarcerated learners greater access to communication tools, such as supervised use of digital devices or restricted email accounts, could empower them to take greater ownership of their education. Farley (2022) emphasized that balancing security with educational goals is essential for creating equitable and effective prison education systems.

The communication barriers faced by incarcerated learners in this study reflect systemic challenges that limit their ability to engage fully with their education. Delayed responses, reliance on intermediaries, and restrictive institutional policies create a sense of disconnection and frustration that undermines academic success. Addressing these barriers through targeted reforms in infrastructure, training, and policy can help create a more supportive and responsive educational environment, enabling incarcerated learners to achieve their academic and rehabilitative goals.

Access to Study Materials

Access to study materials emerged as a critical challenge for incarcerated learners, profoundly impacting their ability to engage with educational programs effectively. Participants consistently reported difficulties in obtaining essential resources such as textbooks, course materials, and other academic tools. These barriers were primarily attributed to the procedural inefficiencies within prison systems, a lack of understanding among prison staff about the importance of education, and institutional constraints that limited direct access to external academic resources. One participant encapsulated the central issue, stating:

> *"The only challenge I saw I find it was especially at the officer side, some of the officers who were assigned to assist us at the education section, they could not understand what the importance of studying is. So, you might find that if you ask the officer, he will take you to the campus or the institution so that you can collect some of your material, or to*

engage with your lecturer because of some of the problems which you face during your studies."

This testimony highlights the critical role that prison staff play in facilitating—or hindering—access to study materials. Officers who lacked awareness or appreciation of the significance of education often failed to prioritize requests, leading to delays and frustrations for learners. Similar findings were documented by Eizadirad and Chambers (2023), who emphasized the importance of collaboration between educational staff and prison officers in ensuring the success of prison education programs. When officers are well-informed and supportive, they can act as advocates for incarcerated learners, facilitating smoother access to resources. Conversely, when they are indifferent or obstructive, they become a significant barrier to education. Participants also reported systemic delays in acquiring necessary materials due to the reliance on intermediaries. One noted:

"Because of our environment, it is very difficult for us to always have contact with outside… whenever we need some form of material which we cannot access, we send them [requests], and they send the security officer to collect for us."

This reliance on intermediaries often resulted in prolonged waiting times, particularly when materials needed to be sourced from external institutions. Requests were frequently delayed by bureaucratic processes, logistical issues, or the limited availability of prison staff to prioritize such tasks. This inefficiency not only stalled academic progress but also contributed to feelings of helplessness and disempowerment among learners. Additionally, there were instances where the institution or lecturer on the outside was unresponsive, further compounding the difficulties. As one participant described:

"You will send that email to the lecturer, and you would get no response. So, it also puts us at a psychology problem, so those are some of the problems we are faced with."

These delays and lack of responses created a sense of isolation and neglect, as learners felt disconnected from their educational institutions. Research by Lahm (2009) supports this observation, noting that limited access to academic support and materials can erode motivation and hinder learning outcomes for incarcerated students.

The inadequacy of study spaces and technology within correctional facilities further exacerbated the issue. Participants highlighted how physical constraints within prisons, such as overcrowded or noisy environments, impeded their ability to focus and effectively utilize the materials they did manage to obtain. One participant shared:

"You might find that the officer would say there is no need for you to go [to access resources], but in prison, there's also no space for studying or working quietly."

This lack of dedicated study areas reflects broader systemic shortcomings in prison education infrastructure. Hogan et al. (2024) similarly found that inadequate study spaces and limited access to technology in correctional settings create significant barriers to academic success. Without environments conducive to learning, incarcerated students struggle to make meaningful progress, even when provided with study materials.

Access to technology also played a central role in shaping the experiences of incarcerated learners. Participants repeatedly pointed to the absence of reliable technological tools, such as computers, internet connectivity, and digital learning platforms, which restricted their ability to access online resources or complete assignments efficiently. One participant explained:

"I had a little bit of a challenge because of this issue of laptops, technology of computers since I never knew computers. I came to learn the computer in prison."

This observation underscores the compounded challenges faced by learners who not only lack access to technology but also need to develop digital literacy skills. Pulido (2023) and Adeyeye (2019) emphasized that the digital divide in correctional facilities exacerbates educational inequities, leaving incarcerated learners at a significant disadvantage compared to their peers outside.

The logistical and procedural constraints within prisons also highlighted the need for systemic reform. Several participants expressed frustration with the rigidity of prison schedules and rules, which limited their ability to access resources at critical times. One participant noted:

"Also, the challenges we find… security is one to make the communication. To this effect, the admin level as supervisor but the support is from myself… so far, I haven't faced any challenges in terms of the support from my supervisors, but materials always take time."

These delays often forced learners to navigate their studies with incomplete or outdated materials, which hindered their ability to keep pace with their courses. This aligns with findings by Sisinyize et al. (2023), who argued that timely access to learning aids is essential for maintaining the continuity and quality of education in prison settings.

The psychological toll of these barriers was evident throughout participants' narratives. Several described feelings of frustration and demotivation when faced with repeated delays or obstacles in accessing study materials. One participant captured this sentiment:

"It puts us at a psychological problem. You feel like you're not being supported, and it affects your motivation to continue."

This emotional impact reflects the broader challenges of pursuing education in an environment that often prioritizes security and control over rehabilitation and personal growth. Lahm (2009) and Bolliger and Halupa (2012) highlighted similar patterns, where systemic barriers in distance education contexts erode learners' confidence and sense of agency.

Several reforms are necessary to address these barriers. First, correctional facilities should establish dedicated liaisons for educational services, tasked with streamlining the process of acquiring study materials. By centralizing this responsibility, delays caused by bureaucratic inefficiencies and miscommunication could be minimized.

Second, training programs for prison staff should emphasize the rehabilitative value of education and their role in facilitating access to resources. Participants consistently pointed to the lack of awareness or support among officers as a major obstacle, indicating the need for cultural shifts within prison systems.

Third, investments in technology infrastructure are critical. Providing incarcerated learners with supervised access to computers, online resources, and digital learning platforms could significantly enhance their educational experiences. Pulido (2023) and Hogan et al. (2024) both highlighted the transformative potential of technology in bridging educational gaps for marginalized populations.

Finally, institutions offering educational programs to incarcerated learners must prioritize responsiveness and adaptability. Delayed responses from lecturers or unavailability of materials undermines the trust and connection between students and their academic institutions. Establishing clear protocols for timely communication and resource provision could mitigate these challenges and foster a more supportive learning environment.

The difficulties faced by incarcerated learners in accessing study materials are deeply rooted in systemic inefficiencies, institutional constraints, and a lack of supportive infrastructure. These barriers not only hinder academic progress but also take a psychological toll on learners, diminishing their motivation and sense of agency. Addressing these challenges requires a multifaceted approach, encompassing reforms in policy, infrastructure, and cultural attitudes within correctional facilities. By prioritizing the educational needs of incarcerated learners, institutions can empower them to achieve meaningful academic and personal growth, ultimately contributing to their successful rehabilitation and reintegration into society.

Comparison with Previous Research, Implications, and Recommendations

The findings of this study align with and expand upon existing research in prison education, particularly concerning the challenges of technological access, communication barriers, and limited access to study materials. By exploring incarcerated learners' perceptions, this research offers nuanced insights into the systemic and contextual factors shaping their educational experiences. Additionally, it provides actionable recommendations for enhancing the support structures and policies that underpin prison education programs.

In comparing the findings with previous research, it becomes evident that the digital divide remains a significant barrier to education in correctional settings. Participants in this study reported difficulties with accessing and using computers, a finding echoed by Pulido (2023) and Adeyeye (2019), who identified technological access as a critical determinant of educational success in prisons. Participants highlighted their limited prior exposure to technology, compounded by security restrictions that curtailed access to digital tools. For instance, one participant stated:

"I had a little bit of a challenge because of this issue of laptops, technology of computers, since I never knew computers. I came to learn the computer in prison."

This finding underscores the need for targeted interventions to address the digital literacy gap among incarcerated learners. Comparatively, Adeyeye (2019) emphasized that insufficient training and infrastructure in prisons exacerbate the digital divide, leaving inmates ill-equipped to engage with modern educational platforms. The parallels between these findings suggest that digital literacy training and improved technological infrastructure should be prioritized to enhance educational equity in correctional facilities.

Communication barriers also emerged as a consistent theme, reflecting findings from Lahm (2009) and Bolliger and Halupa (2012), who noted that inadequate

communication between learners and their supervisors in distance education contexts leads to feelings of isolation and frustration. Participants in this study highlighted the logistical challenges of maintaining consistent communication, often relying on intermediaries such as prison staff to relay messages. One participant noted:

> *"Sometimes we could not find the supervisors, sometimes we call, and they don't answer. Sometimes we send mail, and when there is no response, I normally ask my wife to send the supervisor an SMS, then she will reply."*

This fragmented communication process aligns with Bolliger and Halupa's (2012) findings, which emphasized that ineffective communication systems in distance education undermine students' academic progress and satisfaction. Furthermore, Lahm (2009) argued that a lack of direct interaction between learners and educators diminishes the sense of connection and support that is critical to educational success. These parallels suggest a pressing need for correctional facilities to implement reliable and efficient communication channels, such as secure email platforms or scheduled video conferencing sessions, to facilitate direct and timely interactions between learners and their supervisors.

Access to study materials emerged as another critical challenge, with participants citing delays and procedural inefficiencies as significant obstacles. For example, one participant explained:

> *"You might find that if you ask the officer, he will take you to the campus or the institution so that you can collect some of your material, or to engage with your lecturer because of some of the problems which you face during your studies. You might find that the officer would say, 'No, there is no need for you to go.'"*

This finding resonates with Eizadirad and Chambers' (2023) assertion that effective collaboration between educational staff and prison officers is essential for ensuring timely access to learning materials. Similar to the systemic inefficiencies observed by Sisinyize et al. (2023), participants in this study experienced delays that disrupted their academic progress and heightened feelings of frustration. These recurring issues underscore the importance of streamlining processes for acquiring study materials and fostering a more supportive institutional culture.

The implications of these findings are significant, as they highlight the need for systemic reforms to address the structural barriers that impede access to education in correctional facilities. First, investments in technological infrastructure are essential to bridge the digital divide. Secure, prison-appropriate technologies such as monitored internet access and educational platforms could enable incarcerated learners to engage with digital resources and develop critical digital literacy skills. Pulido (2023) and Hogan et al. (2024) both emphasized the transformative potential of technology in enhancing educational outcomes for marginalized populations. Correctional facilities must work collaboratively with educational institutions and technology providers to implement these solutions effectively.

Second, the role of study supervisors must be reconceptualized to prioritize accessibility, responsiveness, and contextual understanding. Participants in this study expressed both appreciation for supportive supervisors and frustration with those who were unresponsive or unavailable. As one participant noted:

"Communication-wise, it is where the problem is… The lack of contact with your supervisor is a bit problematic in your studies somehow."

This finding aligns with Wilson and Pool's (2024) call for enhanced training programs that equip supervisors with the skills and knowledge needed to navigate the unique challenges of working with incarcerated learners. Such training should include strategies for effective communication, cultural sensitivity, and fostering a sense of belonging among learners. Supervisors must also be supported by institutional policies that prioritize their role as educational facilitators, ensuring they have the time and resources to engage meaningfully with their students.

Third, improving access to study materials requires the establishment of clear protocols and dedicated liaisons within correctional facilities. Participants consistently reported delays and obstacles in obtaining learning resources, often attributing these issues to a lack of prioritization by prison staff. Institutions must address these inefficiencies by streamlining administrative processes and fostering collaboration between prison officers and educational providers. Sisinyize et al. (2023) highlighted the importance of access to learning aids in sustaining student engagement, a point that remains highly relevant in the context of this study.

Finally, the findings of this study have broader implications for policy and practice in prison education. By addressing the systemic barriers identified in this research, correctional facilities can enhance the educational experiences of incarcerated learners, ultimately contributing to their rehabilitation and reintegration into society. Policymakers must recognize the rehabilitative potential of education and allocate sufficient resources to support its implementation. This includes funding for technology, staff training, and the development of innovative programs that address the unique needs of incarcerated learners.

The recommendations for improving prison education systems are both practical and urgent. First, the establishment of partnerships between correctional facilities and external educational institutions can provide access to expertise, resources, and curricula that align with the needs of incarcerated learners. As noted by Akin (2023), such collaborations are critical for enhancing the quality of educational programs. Second, implementing digital solutions such as e-learning platforms and secure communication tools can mitigate the logistical and physical barriers faced by incarcerated learners. Research by Garner (2024) and Pulido (2023) demonstrates that technology can play a transformative role in making education more accessible and equitable in correctional settings.

Third, developing comprehensive training programs for prison staff, including supervisors and officers, is essential for fostering a supportive educational environment. These programs should emphasize the importance of education in rehabilitation, equip staff with the skills needed to facilitate learning, and address the cultural and psychological barriers that incarcerated learners face. Barton et al. (2024) and Wilson and Pool (2024) highlighted the value of professional development in enhancing the capacity of supervisors and officers to support educational initiatives effectively.

Lastly, institutional policies must prioritize the integration of education into the broader goals of rehabilitation and reintegration. By aligning educational programs with vocational training, life skills development, and emotional education,

correctional facilities can better prepare incarcerated individuals for successful reentry into society. Novo-Molinero et al. (2024) emphasized that holistic educational approaches have the potential to transform the lives of incarcerated learners, reducing recidivism and fostering long-term personal growth.

The findings of this study contribute to a growing body of literature on the challenges and opportunities in prison education. By comparing these findings with previous research and proposing targeted recommendations, this study underscores the critical need for systemic reforms to enhance the accessibility, quality, and impact of educational programs in correctional facilities. Addressing these challenges requires a collaborative effort among policymakers, educators, and correctional administrators to create an equitable and supportive learning environment that empowers incarcerated learners to achieve their full potential.

CONCLUSION

This study explored the perceptions of incarcerated learners regarding the challenges they face with their academic supervisors in correctional education programs. The findings revealed several systemic and interpersonal barriers that hinder the effectiveness of these programs. Technological restrictions emerged as a significant obstacle, with participants citing limited digital literacy and insufficient access to necessary tools as critical impediments to their academic progress. These challenges underscored the broader digital divide within correctional settings, which restricts the ability of incarcerated learners to fully engage in online educational opportunities.

Communication barriers were another prominent issue, with participants describing inconsistent and delayed interactions with supervisors. These difficulties were often exacerbated by logistical constraints, including geographical distance and institutional policies that restricted direct communication. The lack of reliable channels for timely and meaningful interactions left many students feeling unsupported, negatively impacting their motivation and academic performance.

Participants also reported challenges in accessing study materials, highlighting inefficiencies in administrative processes and a lack of prioritization by prison staff. These delays disrupted their learning and underscored the need for better collaboration between correctional facilities and educational institutions. In some cases, supervisors were perceived as disengaged or ill-equipped to address the unique needs of incarcerated learners, further compounding the difficulties faced by these students.

Despite these challenges, the study also highlighted examples of effective supervisory practices. Participants who had access to responsive and proactive supervisors reported more positive educational experiences, emphasizing the transformative potential of well-structured support systems. These findings underscore the critical role of supervisors in facilitating access to resources, fostering communication, and providing tailored guidance to incarcerated learners.

The findings of this study suggest several practical implications. Policymakers and correctional administrators must prioritize systemic reforms to enhance educational access and equity in correctional facilities. Investments in technological infrastructure, including secure digital tools and platforms, are essential to bridging the digital divide and enabling incarcerated learners to participate fully in educational

programs. Additionally, institutions must establish clear communication protocols and training programs to equip supervisors with the skills needed to navigate the unique challenges of correctional education.

Future research should explore the longitudinal impacts of enhanced supervisory practices on the educational outcomes and rehabilitation trajectories of incarcerated learners. Comparative studies across diverse prison contexts could provide further insights into the effectiveness of different approaches to correctional education. By addressing the systemic and interpersonal barriers identified in this study, stakeholders can work toward creating a more inclusive and supportive educational environment that empowers incarcerated individuals to achieve their academic and personal goals, ultimately contributing to their successful reintegration into society.

RECOMMENDATION

Actionable strategies must address the systemic and interpersonal barriers identified to enhance the effectiveness and equity of prison education programs. A key recommendation is the implementation of comprehensive training programs for study supervisors. These programs should equip supervisors with skills in empathy, effective communication, and digital literacy. Participants in this study highlighted the need for supervisors who understand the unique challenges of incarcerated learners, particularly in fostering a supportive and nonjudgmental environment. Supervisors must also be trained in cultural sensitivity and conflict resolution to address the diverse needs of prison populations effectively. Research by Wilson and Pool (2024) supports this recommendation, emphasizing that well-trained supervisors can significantly improve the educational experience for incarcerated students.

Improved communication infrastructure is critical to addressing the barriers noted by participants. The study revealed frequent delays and miscommunication due to reliance on intermediaries and institutional inefficiencies. To mitigate these issues, correctional facilities should establish secure and efficient systems for direct communication between supervisors and students. For instance, prison-specific email systems, learning management platforms, and scheduled video conferencing sessions can provide reliable avenues for timely interaction. Participants who experienced frequent delays in responses from supervisors stressed the negative impact on their motivation and academic progress. By ensuring that supervisors maintain regular office hours and adhere to clear communication protocols, institutions can enhance students' access to academic support and foster a stronger sense of connection with their educational programs.

Addressing the digital divide is another crucial step in empowering incarcerated learners. The study underscored significant technological barriers, including limited access to computers and insufficient digital literacy skills among students and supervisors. Correctional facilities must prioritize investments in secure technology infrastructure, including computers, internet connectivity, and e-learning platforms. Alongside these investments, targeted digital literacy programs should be implemented to provide foundational training for both learners and supervisors. Participants reported difficulties in navigating online resources, often stemming from a lack of prior exposure to technology. Practical training sessions focusing on basic

computer skills, such as typing and using online platforms, are essential for ensuring equitable access to educational opportunities.

Structured feedback mechanisms should be established to enhance accountability and continuous improvement. Confidential feedback channels can enable students to evaluate their interactions with supervisors and the overall quality of their educational programs. This feedback can inform supervisor evaluations and identify areas requiring improvement, ensuring that supervisory practices remain responsive to students' needs. Participants who felt unsupported by disengaged supervisors highlighted the importance of creating a system that holds supervisors accountable for their roles. Regular performance reviews based on student input can ensure that supervisors remain proactive in addressing challenges and maintaining high standards of academic guidance.

Streamlining access to study materials is another area requiring immediate attention. Participants described significant delays caused by inefficient administrative processes and uncooperative staff, which disrupted their learning. Correctional facilities should establish clear protocols to ensure that study materials are promptly delivered. Collaborative arrangements with educational institutions can facilitate the efficient distribution of resources, minimizing disruptions to students' progress. For example, appointing dedicated liaisons within facilities to manage resource distribution and address logistical issues can alleviate the burden on students and supervisors alike.

Regular one-on-one meetings between supervisors and students can foster stronger relationships and improve the overall learning experience. These meetings should focus on monitoring progress, addressing individual challenges, and tailoring support to the specific needs of each student. Participants who reported positive experiences with proactive supervisors emphasized the value of consistent engagement and personalized guidance. Supervisors must maintain open communication and adopt a proactive approach to resolving academic and logistical challenges, demonstrating a genuine commitment to students' success.

Cultural sensitivity is vital in supporting a diverse population of incarcerated learners. Supervisors must be trained to recognize and address the unique cultural backgrounds and experiences of their students. Tailored support strategies, such as providing language assistance for non-native speakers or offering foundational educational support for learners with limited prior schooling, can create a more inclusive and equitable learning environment. Participants noted that supervisors who demonstrated an understanding of their specific circumstances were better able to foster trust and motivation, contributing to a more positive educational experience.

Collaborative partnerships between correctional facilities, educational institutions, and community organizations are essential for enhancing the quality and breadth of educational offerings. These partnerships can provide access to additional resources, expertise, and vocational training opportunities, enriching the learning environment for incarcerated students. Akin (2023) highlights the value of such collaborations in creating comprehensive and effective educational programs. Partnerships with higher education institutions can also facilitate the development of modular courses and hybrid learning systems, offering flexibility for students navigating the constraints of prison life.

Innovative program development should also be prioritized to address systemic challenges and foster engagement. Peer mentoring programs, for instance, have been shown to promote a sense of community and improve participation among learners. Additionally, modular courses that allow students to progress at their own pace can accommodate the unique scheduling constraints of correctional facilities. Participants who benefited from supportive peer networks underscored the value of initiatives that create opportunities for collaboration and shared learning.

Finally, policymakers must recognize the rehabilitative potential of education and allocate sufficient resources to support its implementation. Investments in technology upgrades, staff training, and culturally responsive curricula are essential to addressing the systemic barriers faced by incarcerated learners. Policies should prioritize education as a core component of rehabilitation, ensuring that it receives the attention and support necessary to succeed within correctional facilities.

By implementing these targeted strategies, correctional facilities and stakeholders can create a more supportive and accessible educational environment. This approach empowers incarcerated learners to overcome barriers and achieve their academic and rehabilitative goals, ultimately contributing to their successful reintegration into society and reducing recidivism. These actionable recommendations provide a roadmap for addressing the systemic and interpersonal challenges identified in this study, ensuring that prison education fulfills its transformative potential.

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APPENDIX I

Interview Protocol

Topic: Supervision of students in a distance e-learning mode: supervision of prisoners

The paper reports on question number 14 in the interview protocol.

1   What is your profession?
2   How old are you?
3   What motivated you to further your studies in a distance E-Learning mode?
4   Who paid for your studies?
5   Which strategies did you use during your studies?
6   What are the advantages of studying in e-learning distance mode?
7   What are the challenges that students may experience in studying in a distance e-learning environment?
8   List the factors that can discourage students studying in a distance e-learning environment.
9   What is your opinion about studying at a distance?
10   How did you manage to study in a distance learning environment?
11   How did you collect your data while in custody?
12   Who help you with data analysis?
13   How can we help students studying in prison to succeed in their studies?
14   What were the challenges about the supervisor during your studies?
15   How did you communicate with your supervisor?
16   Who helped you in prison to do your studies?
17   How did you manage time to do your studies?
18   What time of the day did you study?
19   What motivated you to study in a distance e-learning environment?
20   What advise can you give to students who are studying in a distance mode?
21   State aspects that can help students to study in a distance mode.
22   What advise can you give to people who are in Prison who have not yet started studying?
23   What are your experiences with prison life while studying?
24   What are your experiences studying while in prison?
25   State any factors that can improve the supervision of students in prison.