

The Impact of Educational Programs on the Rehabilitation of Inmates in Correctional Facilities in Kabwe District, Zambia

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Abstract

This study explores the impact of educational programmes on inmate rehabilitation in Kabwe District, Zambia. Guided by Social Learning Theory and Restorative Justice Theory, rehabilitation is conceptualized as behavioural, cognitive, and moral transformation. Findings reveal that participation in literacy, vocational, and moral instruction enhances discipline, emotional regulation, empathy, and self-worth, while fostering employability and reducing misconduct. However, systemic barriers such as inadequate resources, overcrowding, and shortages of qualified instructors limit programme effectiveness. The study concludes that correctional education should be institutionalized and adequately resourced as a core rehabilitative function within Zambia's correctional system.

Keywords: Correctional education; inmate rehabilitation; social learning; restorative justice; recidivism; reintegration

1.0 Introduction

Correctional systems worldwide have shifted from punitive models toward rehabilitation and reintegration. Education is recognized as a key intervention, equipping inmates with knowledge, vocational skills, and life competencies that reduce recidivism and improve reintegration (UNODC., 2023). In Zambia, policy frameworks acknowledge rehabilitation, but implementation remains inconsistent. This study investigates how educational programmes in Kabwe District correctional facilities influence inmate rehabilitation, guided by Social Learning Theory and Restorative Justice Theory.

Historically, prisons functioned primarily as instruments of punishment and deterrence, with limited emphasis on the personal transformation of offenders. Early correctional systems were largely grounded in retributive justice, where incarceration was intended to incapacitate and deter individuals through strict control and deprivation. Contemporary correctional philosophy, however, has increasingly shifted toward rehabilitation and social reintegration as central objectives of imprisonment (Cullen et al., 2020). This paradigm shift reflects growing recognition that punitive approaches alone are insufficient to address the underlying causes of criminal behaviour or to ensure long-term public safety.

Within this rehabilitative framework, rehabilitation is now understood as a dynamic and multidimensional process involving cognitive restructuring, behavioural modification, and moral development rather than mere compliance with institutional rules. Effective rehabilitation seeks to transform offenders' attitudes, values, skills, and decision-making capacities, enabling them to function as law-abiding and productive

members of society upon release. (Shelton, 2021). This perspective aligns with contemporary criminological theories that emphasize learning, socialization, and identity transformation as critical components of behavioural change.

Educational programmes within correctional facilities have consequently emerged as one of the most effective rehabilitative interventions. Education provides inmates with academic knowledge, vocational skills, and life competencies that enhance self-efficacy, critical thinking, and employability. Empirical research consistently demonstrates that inmates who participate in educational programmes exhibit lower rates of recidivism, improved institutional behaviour, and better post-release outcomes, including increased employment opportunities and social adjustment (Davis et al., 2014). Moreover, correctional education has been shown to promote self-discipline, pro-social values, and constructive use of time during incarceration, thereby contributing to safer prison environments.

Despite this robust body of evidence, correctional education remains underdeveloped and unevenly implemented in many African contexts, including Zambia. Structural challenges such as limited funding, inadequate learning infrastructure, shortages of qualified instructors, and competing institutional priorities often constrain the scope and effectiveness of educational programmes within correctional facilities. In Zambia, while policy frameworks acknowledge rehabilitation as a core mandate of the correctional system, practical implementation of educational initiatives remains inconsistent and insufficiently evaluated.

Statement of the problem

Despite recent progress, the provision of correctional education in Zambia continues to face significant challenges that undermine its rehabilitative and reintegrative role. Although modern correctional facilities offer literacy classes, General Certificate of Education (GCE) preparation, and vocational training aligned with the Examinations Council of Zambia (ECZ), access remains uneven and inadequate. Persistent shortages of qualified instructors, insufficient instructional materials, and overcrowded learning environments hinder effective programme delivery (Sepeto et al., 2022).

While the Prisons Act, Chapter 97 legally mandates educational provision for all inmates, implementation remains inconsistent across facilities. Support from NGOs, government agencies, and international organizations such as the UNODC has been valuable but insufficient to address long-standing structural gaps (UNODC, 2020). Consequently, many incarcerated individuals leave prison without formal schooling, vocational training, or life-skills development factors shown to reduce recidivism and enhance employability (Higgins, 2021; Alamu & Makinde, 2020).

The absence of adequate rehabilitation increases the likelihood of reoffending. Recidivism, defined as the tendency of a convicted individual to reoffend after release (UNODC, 2021), remains a pressing concern in Zambia. Former inmates often return to socio-economic challenges such as unemployment, poverty, stigma, and lack of social support, which predispose them to repeat offending (Fazel & Wolf, 2020). Without access to relevant skills, education, and post-release support, reintegration becomes difficult, perpetuating the cycle of incarceration.

Although international and local studies consistently demonstrate that effective correctional education lowers recidivism and improves post-release outcomes (Mwansa et al., 2022), there is limited empirical evidence on how educational programmes within Kabwe District specifically influence inmate rehabilitation. Existing literature highlights the benefits of prison education, yet gaps remain in understanding the nature, effectiveness, and challenges of programme implementation at the district level.

Moreover, insufficient research exists on how different types of educational interventions academic, vocational, and life skills shape reintegration outcomes in the Zambian context.

This study therefore seeks to examine the effectiveness of educational programmes in correctional facilities in Kabwe District, exploring how academic and vocational training contribute to rehabilitation and reintegration. By identifying key challenges and potential solutions, the research aims to strengthen rehabilitation strategies and ensure that inmates receive the necessary support to transition successfully back into society.

Purpose of the study

The main purpose of this study is to find out the impact of educational programs in correctional facilities in Kabwe district on the rehabilitation of inmates for reintegration into society.

Theoretical framework

This study adopts a combination of Social Learning theories and Restorative justice theory. A social learning theory by Albert Bandura (1970) in combination with Restorative justice by Howard Zehr (1990). Behaviour is learnt through interaction, observation, imitation and modelling. Focus on repairing the harm caused by crime, emphasizing accountability, empathy, and community reintegration.

Social Learning Theory

The Social Learning Theory, proposed by Albert Bandura, suggests that individuals learn behaviours, attitudes, and skills through observation, imitation, and interaction with their environment (Bandura, 1977). When applied to the rehabilitation of inmates through education programs in correctional facilities, this theory provides a compelling framework for understanding how incarcerated individuals can acquire new skills, reshape their thinking, and prepare for reintegration into society.

Bandura believes that individuals acquire new behaviors by watching role models. Inmates learn behaviours and skills by observing role models within the correctional facility, such as teachers, counsellors, and rehabilitated individuals (Bandura, 1986). When education programs showcase positive examples such as instructors, guest speakers, or success stories, incarcerated individuals can see first-hand how education leads to meaningful change. This motivates them to adopt similar behaviours and attitudes (Akers & Sellers, 2019).

Learning is strengthened when inmates receive positive reinforcement for their efforts. Certificates, rewards, and recognition help validate their progress, boosting their self-esteem and motivation (Bandura, 1986; Cullen et al., 2020).

Social Learning Theory emphasizes the cognitive aspect of learning, where individuals process information, reflect, and apply knowledge to real-life situations. Courses in emotional intelligence, ethics, and decision-making can help inmates understand the consequences of their actions, improving their ability to reintegrate into society (Bandura, 2001).

Inmates are heavily influenced by those around them, sometimes in negative ways. However, structured education programs may create an environment where peer interactions become positive influences. When inmates study and work together, they encourage each other, foster accountability, and develop social skills that are essential for successful reintegration (Davis et al., 2022)

Through direct exposure to structured learning environments, inmates engage with prosocial behaviours. Seeing educators, mentors, and fellow inmates practicing discipline, respect, and constructive communication will help incarcerated individuals model similar behaviours (Bandura, 1977). Over time, this creates a shift away from criminal thinking toward ethical and responsible decision-making.

Each of these elements plays an important role in helping inmates prepare for life beyond correctional facilities. The Social Learning Theory is very cardinal to this study as it upholds that learning is social, cognitive, and behavioral as well as intertwined. In correctional facilities, Social Learning Theory supports rehabilitation efforts by fostering positive role models, structured education, and peer-based learning to encourage constructive behaviors and reduce recidivism (Bandura, 1986).

Restorative Justice Theory

Restorative Justice Theory, developed by Howard Zehr, emphasizes repairing harm caused by criminal behaviour rather than focusing solely on punishment (Zehr, 2001). It seeks to involve all stakeholders, offenders, victims, and the community in a process that fosters accountability, reconciliation, and healing (Zehr, 2015).

In correctional facilities, restorative justice is integrated into rehabilitation programs by encouraging inmates to reflect on their actions, participate in victim-offender dialogues, and engage in community service (Zehr, 2021). This approach may help inmates transition successfully back into society while addressing the emotional and social impact of crime (Academia.edu, 2021).

Social Learning Theory, proposed by Albert Bandura, is relevant to the problem statement because it clarifies how educational programmes counter negative peer influences in correctional facilities by promoting positive role models, peer learning, and cognitive development. The study's findings on improved discipline, self-esteem, emotional regulation, and pro-social behaviour are well explained by this theory. However, Social Learning Theory mainly addresses behavioural and cognitive change and does not adequately account for moral accountability, emotional healing, or reconciliation with victims and communities.

To address these gaps, Restorative Justice Theory, developed by Howard Zehr, will be incorporated because it explains how moral education, reflection, and restorative practices help inmates accept responsibility, develop empathy, and prepare for meaningful reintegration.

By integrating Social Learning Theory (Bandura, 1977) and Restorative Justice Theory, this research will explore how education programs in correctional facilities not only help inmates develop the skills needed for reintegration but also instil a sense of accountability, responsibility, and belonging within their communities (Shelton, 2021).

2.0 Literature Review

Global scholarship consistently affirms that correctional education reduces recidivism and fosters successful reintegration. Evidence across diverse contexts highlights both its transformative potential and the challenges of implementation.

Early developments

In the 19th century, prison education focused on moral and religious teachings, often provided by religious organizations aiming to reform inmates spiritually. Over time, literacy and vocational training were introduced to help inmates develop practical skills. According to Crone (2022), the emergence of prison education in 19th-century England was driven by penal reformers who sought to instil literacy and moral discipline among inmates. Early prison education programs were largely influenced by religious teachings, with chaplains playing a central role in delivering instructions.

During the 20th century, many countries recognized the role of education in reducing recidivism, leading to the establishment of formal correctional education programs. According to Blackstone (2024), the

expansion of inmate education programs in the U.S. and Europe contributed to lower recidivism rates and improved reintegration outcomes.

Today, correctional education has evolved to include academic courses, vocational training, psychological counselling, and digital literacy programs all over the world including Zambia. Studies indicate that these programs significantly lower recidivism rates and enhance post-release employment opportunities.

Quality in Education

Quality in correctional education is essential for ensuring that incarcerated individuals receive meaningful learning experiences that aid their rehabilitation and reintegration into society. Saunders (2013), indicate that effective correctional education programs are characterized by structured curricula, qualified instructors, adequate resources, and inclusivity. Research suggests that correctional education improves inmates' chances of securing employment post-release and reduces recidivism rates.

Therefore, Education for inmates must be carried out with at most attention as it is a significant aspect of rehabilitation of a vulnerable inmate. In the past, prison education was primarily focused on religious instruction and moral reform and most correctional facilities offered basic literacy programs to help inmates read religious texts, believing that moral guidance would lead to behavioural change (Shelton, 2021). Today, Correctional education is increasingly recognized as an important tool for rehabilitation and reintegration, but perceptions vary across different regions.

Despite its benefits, correctional education faces challenges such as inadequate funding, lack of qualified instructors, and limited access to learning materials. Scholars such as Mumba (2022) and Sepeto et al. (2022) in their study on correctional education in Zambia highlights issues such as inadequate teaching materials, lack of funding, and limited inclusiveness in prison education. The research emphasizes the need for government and NGO collaboration to improve educational access for inmates.

The researcher has observed that education programs are applied in correctional facilities to have an influence on both inmates and society during and after their release. Mulenga (2021) conducted a study on correctional education in Zambia, emphasizing its significance in reducing crime and recidivism while preparing inmates for reintegration into society. The fact that correctional education is highly influential to inmates and society, it sets standards of achieving the Zambian correctional Service vision "To provide quality correctional services". Hence the need for the researcher to find out if Correctional facilities are meeting Educational standards for effective rehabilitation of inmates and whether education received has impacted ex inmates.

Global Perspectives on Prison Education and Inmate Rehabilitation

Recent global literature highlights that educational programs in correctional facilities are increasingly recognized as key components of rehabilitation and reintegration strategies rather than purely punitive measures. A systematic review of recent studies confirmed that education's role in reducing recidivism and improving post-release outcomes is complex and shaped by contextual and structural factors, including program access, quality, and integration with broader social supports (Castell-Britton, 2024). Despite variability in design, contemporary research suggests that education contributes to improved self-efficacy, employability, and social reintegration when appropriately implemented (Castell-Britton, 2024; From Prisons to Programming, 2024).

Europe

In Europe, prison education is embedded within human rights and lifelong learning frameworks. Accredited programmes provide inmates with recognized qualifications, enhancing employability and

fostering pro-social attitudes. Research shows that participation in structured education contributes to lower reoffending rates and improved social inclusion (Hawley et al., 2019).

United States

In the United States, correctional education has been extensively studied. Structured academic and vocational programmes are strongly associated with reduced recidivism and improved employment outcomes post-release (Davis et al., 2014). Policy reforms, such as the restoration of Pell Grant eligibility, have expanded access to higher education in prisons, reinforcing education's role as a cost-effective rehabilitative strategy.

Asia

In Asian contexts, vocational and moral education programmes have demonstrated positive effects on discipline, self-confidence, and reintegration readiness. However, resource constraints, overcrowding, and shortages of trained instructors remain significant barriers to effective delivery (Zhang & Wang, 2021).

Zambia

Within Zambia, correctional education faces persistent challenges, including inadequate funding, shortages of qualified instructors, and overcrowded facilities (Sepeto et al., 2022). While policy frameworks acknowledge rehabilitation as a core mandate, implementation remains inconsistent. This gap underscores the need for empirical studies that examine the specific impact of educational programmes on inmate rehabilitation at the district level.

Theoretical Framework

This study is anchored in two complementary perspectives: Social Learning Theory and Restorative Justice Theory.

Social Learning Theory, developed by Bandura, posits that behaviour is acquired through observation, imitation, and reinforcement. Within correctional education, structured learning environments provide inmates with positive role models, constructive peer interactions, and opportunities for reinforcement through achievement and recognition. This framework explains how literacy, vocational, and life-skills programmes foster discipline, self-control, and pro-social behaviour, thereby reducing misconduct and preparing inmates for lawful living after release.

Restorative Justice Theory, advanced by Zehr, emphasises repairing harm caused by crime through accountability, empathy, and reconciliation. In correctional education, restorative practices such as counselling, moral instruction, and community-oriented learning encourage inmates to reflect on their actions, develop empathy, and rebuild relationships. This framework highlights the moral and emotional dimensions of rehabilitation, ensuring that reintegration is not only behavioural but also ethical and relational.

Together, these theories provide a comprehensive lens for understanding rehabilitation as a multidimensional process. Social Learning Theory explains the cognitive and behavioural transformation fostered by education, while Restorative Justice Theory accounts for the moral and emotional renewal necessary for sustainable reintegration. Their integration underscores the study's central argument: correctional education is most effective when it simultaneously cultivates skills, reshapes behaviour, and instils accountability and empathy.

3.0 Methodology

This study employed a qualitative case study design to explore the impact of educational programmes on inmate rehabilitation in correctional facilities within Kabwe District, Zambia. The design was chosen to

capture the lived experiences of inmates and the perspectives of correctional officers and facilitators, providing rich insights into behavioural, cognitive, and moral transformation. The research was conducted in selected correctional facilities in Kabwe District. In this study, participants included inmates enrolled in educational programmes, correctional officers, and education facilitators. Inmates were purposively sampled to ensure representation across different programme types (academic, vocational, and life skills). Correctional officers and facilitators were included to provide institutional perspectives on programme implementation and outcomes. Data for this study were gathered using a triangulated approach that combined semi-structured interviews, direct observations, and document analysis. Interviews were conducted with inmates, correctional officers, and facilitators to capture both personal experiences and institutional perspectives on educational programmes. Observations of classroom and workshop activities provided insights into behavioural patterns, social dynamics, and the practical delivery of instruction. In addition, institutional records and policy documents were reviewed to contextualize programme implementation and align findings with broader correctional objectives. This triangulation of methods enhanced the credibility, depth, and validity of the study's findings by ensuring that multiple sources of evidence informed the analysis. Data in this study were analysed using inductive thematic analysis. Ethical approval was obtained from relevant institutional authorities. Informed consent was secured from all participants, with assurances of confidentiality and anonymity. Participation was voluntary, and respondents were free to withdraw at any stage without consequence.

4.0 Results and Discussions

The participants were asked to give their views on how educational programmes influence the rehabilitation of inmates in correctional facilities in Kabwe District. The following themes were generated

Behavioural Transformation and Self-Control

The findings revealed that educational programmes contributed significantly to behavioural transformation and self-control among inmates. Participants reported improved discipline, emotional regulation, conflict resolution, and personal responsibility following their involvement in literacy and vocational education programmes. For example, inmates described how literacy classes helped them manage anger and reduce involvement in conflicts, while vocational training promoted patience, planning, cooperation, and respect for others. One participant noted : “Before I joined the literacy class, I was always angry and hopeless. Learning helped me control my temper and think positively “. Correctional officers similarly observed fewer disciplinary incidents and improved institutional behaviour among inmates enrolled in educational programmes. These findings suggest that educational engagement serves as a constructive mechanism through which inmates redirect their attention from disruptive behaviours toward productive activities and personal development.

The findings support Social Learning Theory, which posits that behaviour is learned through observation, reinforcement, and interaction within social environments. Educational programmes provide structured settings where inmates are exposed to positive behavioural models, institutional expectations, and opportunities for self-regulation. The reduction in misconduct reported by both inmates and officers is consistent with studies by Duwe and Clark (2020), Bozick et al. (2019), and Ewert and Wildhagen (2022), who found that correctional education improves institutional behaviour and reduces disciplinary infractions. Similarly, the emphasis on vocational engagement reflects findings by Nguyen et al. (2021) and UNODC (2023), who argue that vocational training promotes self-efficacy, goal orientation, and responsible decision-making. Therefore, the behavioural changes observed in Kabwe District demonstrate

that education functions not merely as a means of acquiring knowledge but as a rehabilitative intervention that strengthens inmates' capacity for lawful conduct and successful reintegration.

Moral and Emotional Rehabilitation

The study further established that educational programmes contributed to the moral and emotional rehabilitation of inmates. One Informant noted "Inmates attending educational programmes demonstrate fewer fights and better discipline ". Participants reported that counselling, religious instruction, and life-skills education helped them overcome feelings of guilt, resentment, and hopelessness while fostering forgiveness, empathy, and optimism about the future. Several inmates explained that educational experiences enabled them to reflect critically on their past actions, accept responsibility, and develop healthier relationships with others. Community stakeholders also noted improvements in ethical awareness and self-understanding among inmates preparing for release. These findings indicate that correctional education promotes emotional healing and personal transformation alongside academic development.

The findings are consistent with Restorative Justice Theory, which emphasises accountability, empathy, reconciliation, and community reintegration. Through educational activities, inmates appear to develop greater awareness of the consequences of their actions and a stronger commitment to positive social behaviour. The results also align with Transformative Learning Theory (Mezirow, 1997), which views critical reflection as a catalyst for personal change. Similar conclusions have been reported by Davis et al. (2013), Esperian (2010), and UNESCO (2015), who found that correctional education promotes emotional stability, ethical reasoning, and prosocial attitudes. The evidence from Kabwe District therefore suggests that education serves as a psychosocial rehabilitation tool that facilitates both emotional recovery and moral development, thereby increasing inmates' readiness for successful reintegration into society.

Development of Positive Identity and Self-Worth

Another important finding was that educational programmes enhanced inmates' sense of self-worth and positive identity. Participants reported that acquiring literacy, vocational, and practical skills restored confidence, dignity, and hope for the future. This was reflected in the testimony of one inmate who stated, "Learning new skills made me feel human again. For a long time, I had lost confidence and hope in myself, but education helped me rediscover my worth. Each lesson gave me a sense of direction and purpose. Now, I see myself as someone capable of contributing positively to society and living a meaningful life after release". This quotation illustrates how participation in educational programmes enabled inmates to develop a renewed sense of purpose and confidence in their ability to contribute positively to society after release. Correctional officers confirmed that inmates participating in educational activities displayed greater confidence, motivation, and commitment to rehabilitation. These findings suggest that education plays a critical role in helping inmates reconstruct their identities away from criminal labels and toward more productive and socially acceptable self-concepts.

These findings support strengths-based rehabilitation perspectives, which emphasise personal agency, identity reconstruction, and the development of prosocial goals as central components of behavioural change. They are also consistent with the work of Farrall et al. (2020), McNeill (2019), and Ward and Fortune (2021), who argue that positive identity formation is essential for desistance from crime. Vocational programmes in particular appeared to strengthen inmates' confidence by equipping them with employable skills and increasing their expectations of lawful employment after release. Similar findings have been reported by Davis et al. (2021) and Newton et al. (2019), who found that vocational education enhances employability, self-reliance, and reintegration outcomes. Consequently, the evidence from this study demonstrates that correctional education contributes not only to skill acquisition but also to the

development of a positive self-image that motivates sustained engagement in lawful and productive lifestyles.

5.0 Conclusion

This study examined the influence of educational programmes on the rehabilitation of inmates in correctional facilities within Kabwe District. The findings demonstrate that correctional education is a significant rehabilitative intervention that contributes to behavioural, moral, emotional, and psychosocial transformation among inmates. Participation in literacy, vocational, and life-skills programmes enhanced inmates' self-discipline, emotional regulation, ethical awareness, and capacity for constructive social interaction, thereby strengthening their readiness for successful reintegration into society.

The study further established that educational programmes promote positive identity reconstruction by restoring self-worth, confidence, and hope for the future. Through the acquisition of knowledge and employable skills, inmates developed a stronger sense of personal agency and a greater belief in their ability to pursue lawful and productive lives after release. These outcomes support theoretical perspectives that view education as a catalyst for behavioural change, personal development, and social reintegration. However, the study also revealed that the effectiveness of correctional education is constrained by institutional challenges, including inadequate infrastructure, limited instructional materials, overcrowding, and shortages of qualified instructors. These barriers reduce programme accessibility and quality, thereby limiting the extent to which educational initiatives can achieve their rehabilitative objectives.

Overall, the study concludes that educational programmes constitute a cornerstone of inmate rehabilitation in Kabwe District. Their contribution extends beyond academic and vocational skill acquisition to encompass behavioural reform, emotional development, and identity transformation. Consequently, strengthening correctional education through increased investment, improved infrastructure, and enhanced institutional support is essential for maximizing rehabilitation outcomes and reducing recidivism among formerly incarcerated individuals.

6.0 Recommendations

Based on the findings and conclusions of the study, the following recommendations are proposed:

1. The government and relevant stakeholders should invest in improving educational infrastructure within correctional facilities. This includes the construction and refurbishment of classrooms and workshops, provision of adequate learning materials, tools, and equipment, and integration of information and communication technology (ICT) to enhance learning delivery. Improved infrastructure will increase access to education and improve learning outcomes.
2. Correctional education programmes should be supported by adequately trained and specialised instructors. Continuous professional development for facilitators should be prioritised to enhance pedagogical skills, learner engagement, and the ability to address the diverse educational needs of inmates. Collaboration with the Ministry of Education and technical training institutions is recommended to ensure quality assurance.

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