EDUCATIONAL PROGRAMS AND TEACHING STRATEGIES

FOR YOUNG OFFENDERS

A research paper submitted in conformity with the requirements

For the degree of Master of Teaching

Department of Curriculum, Teaching and Learning

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Abstract

In 2003, Canadian Parliament introduced the Youth Criminal Justice Act (YCJA). While it seemed our government was making great strides towards giving convicted criminals opportunities for rehabilitation, in 2012, Bill C-10 introduced harsher, longer sentences and new criminal offences (Canadian Civil Liberties Association, 2015). This type of punitive action prevents effective offender rehabilitation and increases the likelihood of recidivism (Canadian Civil Liberties Association, 2015). Within the Canadian young offender community there is a high incidence of youth with learning disabilities, addiction and mental health issues, an overrepresentation of visible minorities, and systemic discrimination. This, combined with Canada’s punitive approach to criminal justice, causes young offenders to experience high levels of recidivism and continued disengagement from Canadian society. This study aims to explore education as a tool for young offender rehabilitation. A range of educational programs for young offenders, with a focus on educational strategies, will be examined by looking at both the existing literature and interviews conducted for the purpose of this study. The four primary institutions examined are classrooms in correctional facilities, Section 23 classrooms, drop-in centers for homeless youth, and long-term programs that focus on gang exit strategies and arts entrepreneurship. This paper will cover standardized learning, individualized programming, outdoor and arts-based learning, and community building. The findings of this research should provide educators and policy makers with insight into how they may deliver educational programming that can engage and enable young offenders to be successful in their futures.
Key Words:
Young offender, reintegration, rehabilitation, empowerment, educational strategies, classroom methods, alternative programs, transient students, drop-in center, correctional facility, arts-based learning, outdoor programming, culturally relevant programs, life skill learning, standardized program, individualized program, critical thinking, at-risk youth, educational engagement, mental illness, systemic discrimination, Section 23,
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Educational Programs and Teaching Strategies for Young Offenders

Chapter 1: Introduction

Introduction to the Research Study

In 2003 Canadian Parliament enacted the Youth Criminal Justice Act (YCJA). This act emphasized diversions from court and restrictions on custody (Bala, 2011, p.9). The Act (2003-present) contains statements and values which acknowledge social responsibility for the needs of young people and state intentions to “rehabilitate and reintegrate young persons” (Ontario Ministry, 2011). In recent years numerous bills to increase harsh punishments for youth committed offences have been proposed. One such bill was the Safe Streets and Communities Act passed in 2012. This legislation brought forth new criminal offences, increased minimum sentences, and created longer wait times for pardon applications (Canadian Civil Liberties Association, 2015). This problematic bill places an offender’s potential to reintegrate at risk. According to the Canadian Civil Liberties Association (2015) “the research suggests that putting an individual in jail for longer will actually increase the likelihood of reoffending.” New looming Federal legislation seeks to increase the types of crimes for which young people serve time and the increase the length of sentencing. Considering these upcoming changes, it is important to take a look at what may be done to help reintegrate young offenders into society.

According to The Youth Criminal Justice Act, young offenders range between the ages of 12 and 18 and are “alleged to have committed criminal offences.” (Youth Justice, 2015). Young offenders are often processed through the judicial system in a manner that further alienates and disenfranchises an already excluded community. In the United
States, the juvenile justice system processes over 2.5 million arrests over the course of a year, ultimately 8% - 10% of American youth (Chung, Little, Steinberg, 2004). Shockingly, Canada has higher youth incarceration rates than most other countries associated with the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) (Paperny, 2011). Many youth are subject to the criminal justice system due to discrimination based on race, class, and ability. This is reflected in the overrepresentation of some populations in the youth criminal justice systems. According to Chung, Little, and Steinberg’s article “Re-entry of Young Offenders from the Justice System,”

“Black and Hispanic youth (in the United States) make up about 15% and 16% of the general population (and) account for about 45% and 20% of the … adolescents who are in residential placement within the juvenile justice system” (p. 36).

In Canada, the indigenous population faces gross overrepresentations in the youth justice system. In British Columbia, 35% of indigenous youth in the child welfare system are likely to be in the youth justice system and are five times more likely to be in custody than non-indigenous youth (Bala, 2011, p.12). These overrepresentations indicate not only an inequity inherent in Canadian society, but a systemic disenfranchisement of a people.

Moreover, it is common for youth with criminal histories to experience educational failure and have problems securing employment later in life (Chung, Little, Steinberg, 2004, p.22). In the United States twelve percent of “formerly incarcerated adolescents (74% less than the national average) receive their high school diplomas” (p.23). Another study shows that only around 30% of young adults were engaged in either school or work during the first year after their release (Chung, et al., 2004, p.23). A lack of educational engagement and success following one’s sentence has been connected
to a higher likelihood of recidivism. Truancy, frequent school transitions or a lack of school stability was found to be a common experience among youth re-offending (Bertrand, Hornick, McRae & Paetsch, 2011, p.176). This research points to an overwhelming trend of educational disengagement among young offenders.

The opportunities a positive learning environment can provide for youth has a substantial impact on their development. There is a clear relationship between young offenders deciding to desist from crime and their ability to secure employment, attend school regularly, and develop positive personal relationships (Gorman, Gregory, Hayles & Patron, 2006). Not only do these environments facilitate opportunities for students to develop positive personal relationships, but they also create access to knowledge and a development of consciousness. According to Robert Gaucher, a criminology professor at the University of Ottawa “Education gives them (offenders) options, it gives them a broader understanding of the world and helps them make sense of it at different levels. Education gives you the feeling that you can achieve something.” The goal of education, Barkany writes (2008), is to develop “individuals who have tools to not re-engage in criminal activities when they return to the community” (Barkany, 2008). According to Nicolas Bala, education and employment are key factors aiding an offender’s rehabilitation and reintegration process (Bala, 2011, p.16). The support and mobility provided by education cannot be overstated.

In addition to practical tools, education can provide offenders with opportunities to develop their self-efficacy. In an article written for the Ontario College of Teachers (OCT), a former inmate of an Ontario penitentiary, currently lawfully employed, was interviewed. Upon reflecting on his personal experience in correctional facilities he stated, “education gives you confidence” (Barkany, 2008). The ability for education to
transform and enable lives suggests the need for further research into the area of how educational programs for young offenders can be most effective.

Purpose of the Study

This study seeks to explore the specifics of how educational programming can be used to empower and reintegrate young offenders. Specifically, what educational programs exist for young offenders and what educational strategies and content have been found to be effective? In my research I explore young offender demographics with regards to ethnicity, race, mental health, ability, and culture. Various young offender educational programs are examined including classrooms in correctional facilities, Section 23 classrooms, drop-in centers, and long-term programming. Lastly, the educational strategies analyzed include standardized vs. individualized instruction, arts and outdoor learning, community building, flexibility, predictability, and life skill learning. Through the exploration of these programs and strategies, this study uncovers both positive and problematic areas of young offender educational programming. This analysis aims to contribute to future efforts to build effective programming for young offenders.
Research Questions

This investigation focuses on particular programs and strategies in the area of young offender education.

Questions include the following:

a. How do educators working in informal or formal learning environments describe their work with young offenders?

b. What educational strategies and theoretical approaches are used in rehabilitation programs?

c. How do educators working with young offenders describe the subject matter their program teaches?

d. How do educators describe the response of the participants to the program?
Background of the Researcher

My interest in programs for at-risk youth stems from intersecting areas of my life. The first area is in education which encourages youth empowerment. Much of my experience as an educator has revolved around youth empowerment in Toronto, specifically in youth leadership. This work has been both fulfilling and eye-opening. I witnessed program participants grow a great deal during their educational process. They utilized the program as a tool with which to deconstruct and better understand their personal histories and the world around them. While education provides learners with the tools to work and succeed in our world, I also believe it empowers and brightens. This quotation from the novel *The Once and Future King* illustrates the power of learning:

“The best thing for being sad," replied Merlin, beginning to puff and blow, "is to learn something. That’s the only thing that never fails. You may grow old and trembling in your anatomies, you may lie awake at night listening to the disorder of your veins, you may miss your only love, you may see the world about you devastated by evil lunatics, or know your honour trampled in the sewers of baser minds. There is only one thing for it then — to learn. Learn why the world wags and what wags it. That is the only thing which the mind can never exhaust, never alienate, never be tortured by, never fear or distrust, and never dream of regretting. Learning is the only thing for you. Look what a lot of things there are to learn.” (White, 1958, p.186)

Through education, I have found time and again that students discover who they are, what makes them happy, and they gain confidence and agency to live a fuller life.

The second area of interest, which played a role in leading me to this study, was the issue of policing and discrimination in our judicial systems. This past year I worked with the Policing Literacy Initiative, a group of young academics and professionals, on a research report reviewing the Toronto Police Services. This document evaluates the different bodies in place in Toronto which aim to protect and serve the city. Before this project I was well aware of the issue of racial profiling, but I did not have a factual grasp
on just how prevalent it is- not only in the United States, but in our very own city of Toronto. Some of the figures around racial profiling and biased policing were quite shocking.

This research made an impression on me and caused me to think more deeply about affected youth and what support could be offered at different points in their judicial processing experience. Preventative measures are both important and practical. They allow individuals to deal with discrimination before it takes place. The unfortunate reality we see today is that many youth are, or have been, processed through the criminal justice system and become trapped in the cycle of crime.

I see education as a powerful tool not only to help students grow and build their futures, but also to rehabilitate and reintegrate into society. In a practical sense education can help young offenders attain stable employment and participate productively in society. On an emotional and social level, I believe education can also support young offenders in discovering new positive interests, personal agency, and sense of self. These values and beliefs are my motivation for exploring the topic as a research project.

With this study I hope to shed light on the important area of education for young offenders. Both as an area where a lot of good and important work is being done, and as an area where there is a lot of potential for growth in terms of effectiveness.
Chapter 2: Literature Review

In my literature review, I explored a number of articles and books written on the topic of young offender education programs in various systems. These programs exist in the United States, the United Kingdom, and Canada. Initially I had hoped to focus on formal educational structures, particularly classrooms in Section 23 of Ontario school boards. I found information and access to these programs’ restricted. Therefore, I broadened my research to gain perspective on different programs. This section is organized into the following six themes: (1) Student Demographic; (2) Educational Programming Content; (3) Programs Currently Available; (4) Program Strategies; (5) Class Management; and (6) Teacher Training.

Student Demographic

Here we will explore the demographic of the young offenders in these programs with regards to ethnicity, race, class, ability, and culture. I will also discuss current literature on student motivation and attitudes towards schools.

According to Gilbert and Lou’s article, “Alternative Education Support for Youth At-Risk,” (1999) students who are excluded from mainstream education are “disproportionately poor, disabled, bilingual, and from minority groups” (p.76). A criminology professor at the University of Ottawa explains, “many people who end up in gangs, dealing drugs, or involved in property crime are people who come from impoverished backgrounds and difficult situations” (Barkany, 2008). Socio-economic status was found to be a consistently present factor in the lives of young offenders (Caputo, DeGusti, Hornick, MacRae & Vallee, 2009, p.178).
Learning exceptionalities were also found to be common among young offender populations. The national incidence of learning disabilities among incarcerated youth in the United States is between 42% and 60% and according to Eggleston “persons with learning disabilities are more likely to penetrate further into the justice system and to stay longer than nondisabled peers” (1995, p.18). In a recent study, diagnoses of Attention Deficit Disorder (ADD) and Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) were found to be common among reoffenders (Bertrand, et al., 2011, p.176). Mental illness was also found to be widely present in young reoffending populations, along with diagnoses of Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder (FASD) (Bala, 2011, p.16). A Toronto study found that 82% of young offenders studied met the criteria for at least one psychiatric disorder and 60% of the sample had been diagnosed with Oppositional Defiant Disorder (ODD) (Caputo, et al., 2009, p.15). These findings reveal characteristics of the young offender student population which can inform how educational programs are delivered.

Young offenders are characterized as having transient and unpredictable life circumstances. When attempting to complete a survey with young offenders, Carol Hayden wrote in “Education, Schooling and Young Offenders of Secondary School Age” (2008), the study population was too “chaotic to incorporate attendance at an educational program, even with a support worker” (p.25). This illustrates some of the potential challenges in working with this population.

These students often face ethnic or racial discrimination. Visible minority groups, such as young black men, are more policed (McIntyre 1993; Waldie & Spreen 1993). In Toronto, between 2008 and 2012 the number of black males aged 15-24 who were stopped and carded was larger than the total population of black males in Toronto.
(Bettencourt-McCarthy, Gang & Rosenblum, 2015, p.28). Additionally crime rates were found to be significantly higher for indigenous youth (Bala, 2011, p.8). This type of over-policing of communities often leads to an erosion of trust in authority and overrepresentation of visible minorities in the judicial system. The reality of poverty, disabilities, learning exceptionalities, transience, and discrimination are important elements to acknowledge when working to understand the young offender student population.

Motivation

As previously mentioned in this study, young offender populations tend to have strained relationships with schooling. In a classroom setting, this population can be unresponsive, suspicious, antisocial, and isolated (McIntyre 1993; Waldie & Spreen 1993). Students are often reluctant to participate, have a lack of self-control, and hold negative attitudes toward school (Denti & Guerin, 1999, p.84).

Participation in education programs is not necessarily voluntary. Young offenders may be mandated to complete educational programing in order to be eligible for work release, a parole grant, or special privileges (Cotronea & McKinney, 2011, p. 176). Students, when participating in correctional education settings, are reported to experience low levels of motivation. Motivation levels may be related to the student’s perception of the relevance of programming. According to Cotronea and McKinney (2011), research indicates that “when students fail to understand the value of a course, their motivation to do well in that course is significantly reduced” (p.181). In studying inmate participation in school programming, a 2004 Kentucky State Reformatory study (2006) found
“securing future employment and gaining self-esteem” as central reasons for higher levels of motivation among students (Stengel & Tewksbury, p.14).

The article “Using Self-Determination Theory in Correctional Education Program Development” suggests the application of Self-Determination theory to engage students in educational programming. This theory proposes that competence, autonomy and relatedness must be in place for student engagement. The article states:

“Competence refers to being effective in a given situation and/or environment. Autonomy is the universal urge to be in charge of one's own life and circumstances. Relatedness is the universal need to interact with others and to feel connected to the group as a whole” (Cotronea & McKinney, 2011, p.181).

**Student Attitudes**

The literature shows young offenders often have negative experiences in regular school environments and with teachers. Students reported feeling “disconnected” and different from their teachers in terms of culture and social class (Ashkar & Kenney, 2009, p.364). Students reported having “little respect for school authority and responded poorly to authoritarian teaching styles” (p.364). Many students feared embarrassment and resented teachers for being judgmental or unresponsive. Students connected their poor classroom behaviour to feelings of anger and disappointment (p.364).

This study found young offender relationships with peers highly influential. Many participants described being conscious of “peer scrutiny,” and influences that “promoted hostility” (Ashkar & Kenney, 2009, p.363). Racial intolerance was found to be significantly associated with problematic violent school behaviours and many students described being affected by school bullying (94%). Some participants described violent behaviours modelled in their home which then reinforced their violent behaviours at school (Ashkar & Kenney, 2009, p.363).
According to a report by the Provincial Advocate for Children and Youth, which discusses youth perspectives of an Ontario correctional facility, youth felt unsupervised and unsafe. In talking about feeling safe when walking to and from school, a student noted, “the fights usually happen at school” during the time between classes when students are walking around. A student recommended, “they should change how they do it. Staff are hopeless. (They should) stagger it (the times when students are leaving their classes)” (It Depends Who’s Working, 2014, p.91). These sources give insight into the student experience and perspective on teacher and peer interactions.

### Educational Programming Content

This theme focuses on the different program content areas found in young offender education programs. I will discuss life skill learning, literacy, and citizenship and leadership learning.

#### Life Skill Learning

The research has shown that a lot of educational content in correctional and alternative programs focus on life skills. The educational programming in American federal correctional institutions has been specifically designed to increase competency, general education, and vocational training, with an emphasis on improving daily living skills, management of leisure time, and the development of mental health skills (Cotronea & McKinney, 2011, p.184). Daily living skills included learning how to manage money, budget expenses, incorporate good nutrition into eating habits, and find and maintain proper housing once back in the community (Cotronea & McKinney, 2011, p.184). An educator at an Ontario Correctional Institute stated she coaches students to, “focus on
skills that are reachable and career and education plans.” Upon the completion of the program she described compiling the student’s resumés and when they see all the skills they have acquired, “they’re thrilled. They feel more prepared to start over” (Barkany, 2008). In Section 23 schools, the Toronto District School Board (TDSB) website describes an important part of their programing as “the development of personal life management skills” (TDSB Section 23, 2014).

**Literacy Learning**

Literacy education was examined closely in one resource. The article “Reading Can Help Young Offenders: Spotlight of Research” (2011), discussed teaching literacy in a relatable way for students. Many non-reading young offenders have a reading age of a child less than seven and often the literacy materials offered have a content level to match the reading level. This means a young offender may be reading content intended for a child (Hart, p.6). This article suggests providing literature geared for the relevant skill level, with content intended for the student’s actual age. This allows for student engagement and increased relatability in literature materials. While literacy teaching strategies were not mentioned in any other resources examined, this article shed light on some of the challenges these students may face.

**Citizenship and Leadership**

Citizenship and leadership were highlighted as important elements of program content. The positive influence of a democratic atmosphere which teaches citizenship and participation in public life is emphasized in the book *Constructive Work with Offenders.*
Here, the programmatic focus is on individual strengths and needs, rather than stereotypes (Chung, et al., 2004, p.25). This emphasis allows for students to feel empowered and have a sense of agency.

Programs Currently Available

This section explores different programs offered to young offenders. Different sections in this theme include Section 23 schools, long-term programming, residential programs vs. day school programs, and program challenges.

Section 23 Schools

Educational programs for young offenders in Ontario take many forms. Different programs for young offenders include alternative education in continuation, community or shelter schools, regional court schools, and correctional facilities (Denti & Guerin, 1999, p.84). The Ontario Ministry of Education states:

“The education goals of school-age students should continue to be supported when they are required to attend government approved facilities for care, treatment or rehabilitative purposes. As far as possible, these students should attend regular or special education classes in local schools. However, in cases where students cannot attend local schools because of their need for care, treatment or rehabilitation, suitable educational programs which recognize the primacy of the care, treatment and rehabilitation needs may be provided by the school board within the program.” (Guidelines for Educational Programs, 2014-15).

These alternative programs are referred to as Section 23 classrooms. According to Upper Grand District School Board “educational programs in care and/or treatment, custodial and correctional facilities constitute as Section 23 classes.” (Section 23 Education Programs, 2014) These programs are expected to address both “the treatment and
The Toronto District School Board describes of Section 23 schools as:

“Programs which provide individualized programming in hospitals, group homes, custody facilities, treatment facilities and classrooms in community schools. The length of time in any given program varies according to the needs of the student, and may involve an assessment period followed by long or short-term treatment” (TDSB Section 23, 2014)

Long-Term Programming

One school program run in partnership with the Toronto District School Board in Scarborough and other locations around the Greater Toronto Area focuses on marginalized and underserved populations. This transitional school was formed to “address the achievement gap demonstrated by underserved youth from marginalized communities, and youth reintegrating post incarceration” (Redemption, 2013). Offenders who were helped through this program had a 3.5% recidivism rate after nine months, one of the lowest in the world (Winsa, 2013).

Residential Programs vs. Day School

The theme of the challenges and benefits of the residential school structure versus the integration of youth into day schools was recurring throughout my literature research. Both Hyland, who wrote *Yesterday’s Answers* (1993), and Brown, who wrote “An Application of Social Learning Methods in a Residential Programme for Young Offenders” (1985) focus on the educational processes of young offenders in residential schools. Hayden, the author of “Education, Schooling and Young Offenders of Secondary School Age” (2008), criticizes residential programs for being disconnected from the
While Chung, Little, and Steinberg, authors of “Re-entry of Young Offenders from the Justice System,” argue in favour of residential schools. This article states the benefits of young offenders being able to develop positive pro-social relationships and important support networks (Chung, et al., 2004, p.23). Clearly a divide exists to which school structure benefits these students more. Currently, day school programs seem to be more common in Canada whereas residential schools are more often used in the U.K.

**Program Challenges**

These alternative programs often face unique challenges different from those of mainstream schooling. One such challenge is creating a positive learning environment. Many programs have a culture of security that restricts the educator’s ability to facilitate engaging participatory activities (Denti & Guerin, 1999, p.85). According to the Ontario Ministry of Education, students in Government Approved Care and/or Treatment, Custody and Correctional Facilities (CTCC) education programs “may be among the most vulnerable and at risk of not completing elementary and/or secondary education.” In these programs the Ministry has identified four essential elements, “assessments and reporting on student achievement, instruction and intervention, transition planning, information management and reporting.” (Guidelines for Educational Programs, 2014-15). This sheds light on the needs unique needs of program participants, and the Ministry expectations.


Program Strategies

I will now explore how programs might utilize individual or group-based activities, repetition, encouragement, alternative assessment, and the creation of a social learning environment.

Group Strategies

Examples of effective group strategies in the literature included token economy activities and practicing self-government. The purpose of a token economy is to reward good behaviour, and punish undesirable behaviour with the granting or confiscating of ‘tokens’ (Brown, 1985, p.325). These tokens can then be redeemed for treats. Another group method mentioned in this article was the development of self-government through the facilitation of regular community meetings (Brown, 1985, p.329). The first strategy may be useful in normalizing positive behaviours while the second can be effective and empowering students to take responsibility for their actions and community.

Individual Programming

I found many articles discussed support for individualized instruction in these programs. The article “Interventions and Services Offered to Former Juvenile Offenders Re-entering Their Communities: An Analysis of Program Effectiveness” discusses the importance of understanding a student’s socioeconomic status, race/ethnicity, and identity formation. If the intent of education as rehabilitation is, in part, to encourage the development of positive student self-identity, the educator must understand the youth on an individual level. In understanding the youth, the educator should be in tune with their
complex personal histories (Jones-Walker & Spencer, 2004, p.92). These sources shed light on what elements an educator should consider when getting to know a student.

The TDSB document on Section 23 programs describes “individual education and treatment plans” as important for each student to have their needs addressed by the instructor (TDSB Section 23, 2014). The Ministry of Education encourages teachers in custody and correctional facilities to pay attention to “each student’s unique patterns of learning, universal design, differentiated instruction” (Guidelines for Programs, 2014-15). An Ontario Correctional Institute educator described creating student goals that “match their abilities, opportunities and financial realities.” (Barkany, 2008) The article “Re-entry of Young Offenders from the Justice System” similarly highlights the importance of opportunity for personal growth that schools offer. These are opportunities to participate in leadership building activities and extra-curricular activities (Chung et al., 2004, p.23). These sources highlight the importance of individualized programming and how this can be a tool for teachers to better understand their students.

Repetition

In Barkany’s article “Teaching Behind Bars, (2008), McDonald, a teacher in Ontario federal prisons discussed his classroom as structured and characterized by repetition, direction, and questions. “Because of some student’s difficulties in retaining information- sometimes due to alcohol or drug abuse- McDonald has found repetition to be particularly important.”
Encouragement

Snowdon, an instructor at an Ontario Correctional Institute, described encouragement and feedback as important for students. She says her biggest challenge is helping students build confidence and “take pride in their achievements” (Barkany, 2008). Self-confidence is often very low with young offenders. Inmates will frequently share with Snowdon “I have no skills. I haven’t done anything worthwhile” (Barkany, 2008)

Alternative Assessment

Alternative assessment uses brief and student-accessible criteria to quickly determine a student's academic skill level. The Ministry of Education suggests teachers utilize ongoing assessment and plan programs that give students performance tasks that target and “respect their particular abilities.” It is also mentioned that “it is expected that students will participate in board or provincial tests.” (Guidelines for Programs, 2014-15). According to Upper Grand District School Board, Section 23 teachers are:

“responsible for the educational assessment of and the program planning and implementation for pupils … the completion of IEPs for all pupils, collaborative involvement with the facility multidisciplinary team … and collaborative development of re-entry plans for pupils returning to the school system.” (Section 23 Education Programs, 2014).

Cotronea and McKinney’s article (2011) recommends the use of thematic units, portfolios, high-interest topics, technology, and affective education in these programs (p.186). Thematic units are used to organize curriculum into skill building and demonstration activities. Portfolios collect student information and products, allowing for a record of the student’s educational progress. This can later be used to support student
transitions into different institutions or future job opportunities. High-interest topics focus on areas of student interest and encouraging student engagement in the content. Moreover, the use of technology allows for assistive use, ensuring wider student access to learning methods. Affective education focuses on the student’s life, personal experience, and opinions (Cotronea & McKinney, 2011, p.186). These elements are all proposed as ways to engage students in their educational programming while making the content relevant to their lives.

**Creating a Social Environment**

Effective educators in this program should be able to support student’s social and personal, as well as academic, development. According to *Teaching Youth with Disabilities in Alternative and Correctional Settings* (Denti & Guerin, 1999), highly effective educators were able to support student’s development of “self-esteem; … social, coping and living skills” They helped to create “a positive peer culture; … a supportive, family-like atmosphere” (p.86). Other similar recommended classroom strategies included community and cultural celebrations, incorporating a variety of learning styles, transition support, and including family involvement (Buhac, Platt & Wade, 2013, p.28).

**Class Management**

Ashkar and Kenney’s article “Young Offender’s Perceptions of School” discussed young offender perception of traditional classroom management as exclusionary and problematic. The study found these approaches undermined student-teacher bonds and the sense of connectedness to the school (Ashkar and Kenney, 2009, p.363). Innovative
suspension centre programs found that 86% of students remained in school as a result of classroom management which focused on “conflict resolution, self-esteem and providing literacy and homework support” (p.363). This illustrates how restorative approaches to behaviour management in the classroom have been found to be more effective than widely used punitive techniques.

Class management techniques mentioned in “An Application of Social Learning Methods in a Residential Programme for Young Offenders” (Brown, 1985) revolves around disciplinary tactics and student responses. The study found students to generally be the most responsive when teachers infrequently asked for students to focus on the lesson, and when teachers did not follow up on their demand (Brown, 1985, p.330). Focusing on social responsibility, personal change, positive classroom environment, coping skills, and self-esteem building are identified as effective methods for classroom management (Buhac, et al., 2013, p.28).

**Teacher Training**

The literature revealed several unique needs for alternative programming. According to Buhac, Platt, and Wade’s article “Technology-Based Induction: Professional Development Strategies for Correctional Education” there are three factors which differentiated kindergarten to grade 12 teaching from correctional education teaching:

(a) the environments where educational programs are provided, (b) the characteristics of the students taught, (c) and, setting demands. Teaching in these programs requires educators who are adaptable and can meet the demands of being professional to satisfy security demands while being educationally authentic to facilitate the development of trust which is so critical in the teaching-learning environment” (Buhac, et al., 2013, p.26).
Teachers should be prepared to individualize programming, accommodate unexpected classroom population changes and promote personal and social skill development in students.

The literature revealed a common sentiment that teacher training for alternative education educators is inadequate. A study of 173 teachers in the California Youth Authority, found that 90% identified a need for “more appropriate training and certification for teachers who plan to teach in alternative instructional settings” (Ashcroft, 1992). Teachers specifically identified a need for increased training to better understand the legal, social, and psychological difficulties students in alternative programming often experience.

This emphasis is reinforced in Ashkar and Kenney’s article (2009) where young offenders described their poor classroom behavior as resulting from feeling anger and disappointment in the classroom. These findings suggest a need “to change the learning context in which this academic failure occurs” and highlights the importance of students developing healthy relationships with teachers and “ensuring students feel acknowledged and supported within the classroom, regardless of academic ability” (p.365).

Several positive teacher strategies were discussed in the literature. At a school managed by the Provincial School Authority the acting principal stated, “teachers often begin by trying to understand the negative experiences and attitudes that may have contributed to the student’s past failures in school” (Barkany, 2008). This reveals an important effort to understand a student’s unique background. In an interview for Barkany’s article “Teaching Behind Bars,” a teacher working in Ontario’s federal prisons
discussed a desire to avoid learning about their student’s criminal histories. He stated “I don’t want to have any notions that they’re not going to be successful, so it’s not necessary for me to know why they’re here” (Barkany, 2008). The development of trust between the student and teacher contributes to a positive student experience in the program. This trust may be established by educator efforts to understand student background while not focusing on criminal history. Appropriate teacher training prior to employment in young offender programs can help teachers develop the skills to build these relationships.
Chapter 3: Methodology

Procedure

To fully explore my research question of what educational programs exist for young offenders and what educational strategies and content have been found effective, I explored both already existing research and completed interviews of my own. The literature review explores research on the area of young offender education in Canada, the United States, and the United Kingdom. The literature examined provides an important mix of historical context and contemporary findings. Based on the literature review findings I was able to refine my interview questions. Next I contacted potential interview participants. Interviews were conducted with three different participants. Each interview provided unique insight into the educator experience in a variety of programs for young offender populations. The information from the interviews was used to develop the themes outlined in chapter four. In the final chapter of this study, I bring together the literature and interviews by identifying important themes throughout.

This is a qualitative phenomenological study which explores the experiences of interview participants. Similar to the description of phenomenological research as written in Research Design (Creswell), I worked to understand the “lived experiences” of my interview participants (2003). This was done by studying a small number of subjects using an in-depth interview.
Instruments of Data Collection

The content of this study was collected from already existing research and three interviews with educators. The theme and intent of the interview was communicated to participants in advance. During the interviews additional prompting questions were used at times for clarification. One formal online or in-person interview was conducted with each study participant. I have included the list of research questions in Appendix B. Some questions include:

1. Please describe the informal or formal learning environment in which you worked with young offenders.

2. Describe the program participants

3. Describe the educational strategies and approaches utilized in this program. Ex. using/incorporating arts-based learning, physical literacy learning, manufacturing technology such as wood working, and machine shop. And theoretical approaches such as: critical thinking, youth empowerment, and mindfulness.

4. What subject matter was taught in this program?

5. What was the response of the participants to the program?

Participants

Three participants were interviewed for this study, whose names are pseudonyms to protect their privacy: Rachel, Dillon, and Margaret.

Dillon works as an educator, facilitator, and mentor in a long-term Youth Gang Exit and Ambassador Leadership Program based in Toronto. This is a 28 to 36 week program which works to “address risk factors for youth at risk of joining gangs and gang
involved youth.” The program focuses on personal development, leadership skills, and employment.

Margaret was a coordinator of a program in Edmonton which worked with youth who were involved with gangs. The program has shown success in “helping vulnerable youth turn their lives around in the long term.” She also worked as a direct educator at a homeless services center based in Edmonton, and at an incubator program which works with youth on entrepreneurial skill building.

Rachel worked as an educational facilitator with the Ministry of Education. In this role she was responsible for special education for the province of Ontario. She later worked in distance education writing. Rachel has extensive experience in special education programming and, through these roles, has experience with correctional classroom environments.

Data Collection and Analysis

Interviews were transcribed using oTranscribe.com. Following transcription I read and reread the transcripts to identify what themes were present in all three interviews, two of the interviews, or very central in one interview. Based on this, I developed categories assigned to each theme. The transcripts were highlighted to identify where the interview contributed to the development of a theme. For this coding process I used both descriptive code methods and, at times, InVivo code methods. This allowed me to attribute a category to an interview quote based on the meaning I extracted from it or based on the actual words used. Once I had compiled all the information which corresponded to different themes, I developed sub-themes. One example can be found in the theme of Program strategies. Once I grouped together all the interview content which
dealt with types of program strategies utilized, I was able to identify sub-themes such as arts or outdoor learning.

**Ethical Review Procedures**

I followed the ethical review approval procedures associated with the requirements of the Master of Teacher research project. Based on this, all interview participants understood their participation to be voluntary and were provided information about the research prior to participation. In person interview locations were negotiated with participants to ensure comfort and convenience. Following this, the consent form (see Appendix A) was presented. Prior to signing, participants were made aware that if they so choose, they would be able to refuse their participation, even after the consent form had been signed, with no repercussions. In addition, I communicated that the participant may refuse to respond to any of the interview questions during the interview, and may request to revisit the transcript and ask that edits be made.

In my study the interview participant names have all been changed to pseudonyms and program names have been omitted to protect the privacy of all participants.

**Limitations**

The limitations in my study stem from barriers to accessing Section 23 information, following the ethical guidelines with regards to interviewing participants, and interview methodology.

One limitation in my study is the lack of information from educators in Ontario Section 23 schools. I found access to these programs quite restricted and was unable to find an educator to interview for my study. Although I include information on Section 23
program structuring and educational priorities in my literature review, I was not able to explore these programs in my interviews.

As my research needed to follow the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education ethical guidelines I was unable to interview students for this study. Although I explored some student perspective in my literature review, the information gathered from the interviews are all from the educator’s perspective. As a result, I was unable to do an exploration of what programs and strategies young offender participants find to be positive and effective.

One of my three interviews was conducted over email. This serves as a limitation as the interview responses are less spontaneous and more premeditated than the other two interviews. While this allowed me to access the participant’s thoughts in a very orderly and concise way, I was unable to prompt the participant with follow-up questions.
Chapter 4: FINDINGS

In my study I conducted three different interviews. My interview with Rachel focused on standardized and formal education programs in a correctional environment. My interview with Margaret discussed informal programming at a homeless service center, and a long-term arts entrepreneurship program. My interview with Dillon focused on a long-term youth leadership program. Based on the information gathered I have highlighted seven themes with which I have organized this section: (1) Student Demographic; (2) Program Diversity; (3) Program Content; (4) Learning Methods; (5) Community Building; (6) Utilizing Flexibility and Predictability and; (7) Future Possibilities.

Stark differences between the educational strategies used in the drop-in center program and organized long-term programming versus the correctional facility program were apparent. The drop-in center program and long-term organized programming valued creativity, relationship building, and individualized programming while the correctional facility program entirely lacked instruction and used only standardized learning methods.

Student Demographic

This theme explores the different student demographics in the programs discussed. Ethnicity, culture, attitude, home life, disability, mental health, and judicial systems history are all discussed.

In Rachel’s interview she described the program participants as “a motley crew who were angry and depressed and bored.” The participants were largely black youth with learning disabilities who “lacked mental, emotional, and academic resources.”
In Dillon’s interview he described the youth participants as having encounters with law enforcement personnel and dealing with individual, family, and community legal issues. These individuals had experienced significant levels of trauma, a lack of support in the home, a lack of trust, and fatalistic attitudes. Dillon suggested responding to the needs of the participants with “establishing strong and meaningful relationships, creating a new, positive circle of trust and support”

Margaret described program participants at the homeless service center as often involved in gangs, demonstrating impulse control issues, or as having learning disabilities. The participants are described as “80% aboriginal, another 15% are white or nonvisible minorities, and another five per cent are new Canadian immigrant refugees.” In programs for youth involved in gang activity, the demographic was described as “80% aboriginal and the other 20% are immigrant refugee and nonvisible minority members.” Margaret discussed racial profiling as the reality for program participants. She mentioned “There are just still a lot of aboriginal people who are getting picked up and getting profiled in that way.” Over half of the program participants are described as having a mental health diagnosis. In the interview Margaret said “at least 60% have some sort of mental health diagnosis though a lot of it is ADHD.” Margaret mentioned “at least half of them (program participants) but probably quite a bit more have had involvement with child and family services as well. So that’s a big reason about why they’re with us and how they got wrapped up in gang life.” She also described some of the systemic oppressions the program participants face:

“They (the participants) are distrustful of the system, they’ve had a lot of systematic oppression. I feel a lot of the staff get really jaded because they put a lot of time into, for example, employment readiness education and getting applications with formal institutions and getting people to job interviews and then they find there’s a lot of discrimination and the person can’t get a job
regardless and then they’ll do the same work with a nonvisible minority person and they get a job.”

**Program Diversity**

In this section I discuss the different types of educational programs the interview participants described.

Dillon, Rachel, and Margaret discussed several different programs, each of which varied in structure. Rachel described correctional facility education programs as rigid environments with standardized programming and no instruction. In such programming guards are present and value the maintenance of behavioural norms over academic involvement. Rachel specified that there’s “no group discussion … there’s no instruction. … There are very strict expectations. You get the material and you (the student) work through it independently.

Dillon discussed a program which focuses on gang-exit strategies. This six month-long program focuses on leadership building, life skills training including financial literacy, and mindfulness. The participants are between the ages of 16 and 24, often not in school and unemployed. Dillon described the youth as sometimes skeptical in response to the program “but with consistent, positive reinforcement, our methods proved to be successful”

Margaret’s interview examined a homeless services center with programs which revolve around life skill training, trust-building, and outdoor and game-based education, along with another program which focused on business training for young at-risk artist entrepreneurs. The aim of the homeless service center is to “provide a safe space,” develop trust with members, and work on goals. Some of the goals include job
acquirement, legal literacy, or social education. According to Margaret, the center is a “community center.”

**Program Content**

This section includes a discussion of the different kinds of content which is covered in the various programs mentioned.

*Employment Skill Learning*

In her work with the drop-in center Margaret described job placement skill learning as including workshops on how to search for jobs, build a resume and prepare for an interview. In the business education program she described an emphasis on teaching skills for artist self-employment. This incubator-type program focused on marketing ones artwork, writing grants, and bookkeeping. In the interview Margaret discussed:

“If you (the participant) were in jewelry making they would connect you with a mentor to do jewelry making and really hone your craft … the second six months was turning yourself into a business. And that’s where I got involved in teaching them business skills. I taught them grant-writing, how to write a grant and how to search for grants, what grant people are looking for, I connected them with a person who would be on grant councils so they could ask questions about the system and then help them write a grant. They also learned about how to set up a gallery show, how to price art, how to deal with that, basic bookkeeping”

*Everyday Skill Building*

Dillon described financial literacy and job placement skill training in their organization’s programing. In the programing Dillon described teaching computer skills as an important component. In addition, Margaret referenced program intent to build
autonomy and self-esteem in program participants. An example of this is through urging program participants to clean after themselves. This was described as a type of empowerment. Margaret discussed the following:

“If they (program participants) were in the child welfare system, they grew up in a group home where everything is done for them all the time. They don’t have to make their own appointments, the group home workers clean up after them, they cook for them, they clean the dishes if they leave them out.”

Margaret also described engaging participants in cleaning as a way of showing the program participants they are valuable members of the community. The participants who stay after the program closes to clean get a chocolate bar but Margaret shared “they don’t care about the chocolate bar they just want to stay and know that they’re part of something and know that they have responsibility.”

Learning Methods

In this section I describe the different learning methods employed by the aforementioned programs.

*Arts-Based Learning*

The use of arts-based learning methods varied depending on program. Most notably, Rachel shared her experience of absolutely no art-based learning methods being used in correctional facility education programs. This was, in part, due to the independent and highly controlled nature of learning in a correctional facility. Rachel said “there was no phys. ed, no art, no music, nothing to uplift the soul. Basics were taught, math, English, geography, anything that you could learn from a text.”

Margaret outlined the use of arts-based learning methods for therapeutic uses. She described art materials simply being laid out for unstructured use at a homeless center in
Calgary. She said “people would sit down and I would be drawing and they would just want to tell their story. And I would just put paper in front of them and I would say ‘just draw it for me.’” In the entrepreneurial incubator program Margaret outlined different types of successful arts programing utilized:

“They have drama and improvisation, they have comedy, they have dance, yoga, movement, all sorts of things in the hubs (different program centers) and so that’s really great for getting people engaged in making murals and in a whole spectrum of programming.”

**Outdoor Education**

Margaret discussed outdoor education which was often associated with culturally relevant practices. In the homeless service center, she worked with a largely aboriginal population and discussed programs including picking medicine, outings to a sweat lodge, and mountain hikes. Program participants were very enthusiastic about these outings. Margaret stated,

“I’m not sure about all aboriginal traditions, but all our elders are Cree so a lot of our people are Cree and in that there’s a strong emphasis on that and its incredible seeing people who are so erratic and often very addicted to their substance of choice and you take them out, you’re not allowed to be involved in ceremony unless you’ve (the participant) been cleaned of any substances for four days beforehand and so seeing the discipline of people willing to make that change and then coming on a ceremony whether it’s a 20 min. pipe ceremony or a four day sun dance, seeing that transition is really powerful.”

**Games-Based Learning**

Margaret discussed games-based learning specifically on the topic of safe drug use. A memory matching game was described where participants needed to match the drug to a description of the effect the drug has on the body and mind. She described this method as a very positive way to engage participants in anecdotal conversation about safe drug use.
Standardized Learning

Rachel discussed the educational programming she observed in correctional facilities as highly standardized with no instruction:

“It’s formal in that there’s no instruction. You get the material and you work through independently. And there’s a teacher who will walk up and down the rows because it’s individualized. It might be different in different facilities … I never saw any individual groupings, that would be expensive and funding is the bottom line.”

In response to a later question in the interview Rachel said, “They (the students) shuffled in and sat down and sat there silently for the teacher to administer their envelopes of material and then they got to work in silence.” As there is no instruction Rachel mentioned the need for the educational materials to have imbedded feedback.

“It’s all broken down into little scraps and the feedback is given: if you said this, then you’re right. If you didn’t say it, let’s review it. But if you did get the answer right you can skip to the next page … it’s repetitive practice and no one there would say: you got the first 17 right, you don’t have to do the next. There isn’t that kind of thing, it’s very lock step to ensure computation every step of the way. There isn’t any imaginative work given.”

Community Building

This section explores the kinds of relationship and community building processes which are prioritized or included in the different programs.

Under the heading of ‘Community Building,’ I am including intentions to cultivate trust between educators and students or efforts to foster meaningful relationships. Dillon described this element as central to the program and specified it was important to “create a positive circle of trust” to combat the challenges participants experience such as trauma and fatalistic attitudes.

Margaret emphasized community building as an important aspect of positive programming. She mentions she overheard a youth worker complaining to their boss:
“that their youth (program participants) had lied to them and looking for sympathy, and hoping for someone to say “sucks these kids are always lying to us.” But the supervisor just said “how can we create a safer space where they don’t have to feel like they have to lie to us. And I think that’s an important mental shift. If you want to help these kids you have to make it clear you’re not judging them. You can set up all the goals you want and if they don’t meet the goals, you’ll say “great, what are we going to work on today.” And they don’t have to feel like they’re not living up to your expectations. And when I had that mental switch the kids could tell and they can trust you and it’s not that you’re setting the bar low it’s that you’re with them wherever they arrive that day and you’re setting the bar higher than they think they can because you believe in them more than they believe in themselves and they feel that.”

Examples of efforts to build trust included educators using youth terminologies (such as “street language”) wherever appropriate and games-based learning to spark casual conversations. Margaret mentioned “they (the participants) really love when you swear and when you don’t sugar coat things.”

**Utilizing Flexibility and Predictability**

Within this theme I discuss how utilizing flexibility and predictability in programs was highlighted in the interviews.

**Flexibility**

In her interview Margaret discussed the importance of programing being dependent on the participant’s perceived needs. She discussed listening to and working towards the goals set by participants. Flexibility was mentioned in terms of the transient and unpredictable nature of the participant demographic. Margaret discussed being unable to assume participants will be present for programing because “sometimes they won’t be allowed in the inner-city because of a gang turf war, or their group home gets
changed or they’ll get picked up and be in jail for a bit.” In another example, Margaret described,

“their (the participant’s) understanding of time is difficult … a huge factor is that they don’t have watches or clocks. The homeless shelter they live in doesn’t wake them up consistently but also their conception of time because of their mental challenges or because of their lifestyle they don’t show up for things. That’s hard if you put a lot of effort into a sweet program and then no one shows up because they don’t know what time it’s for.”

Considering this reality, Margaret recommended teaching standalone lessons in every class. Important themes she suggests are “basic literacies, showing respect for other people, and doing a think detox at the beginning of class.”

**Predictability**

Margaret discussed the need participants have for predictable scheduling and habits of the organization and educators. She said, “They get mad if you don’t advertise something and they miss out on the opportunity… Structure is great, if we’re closed for a day it’ll throw members off.”

**Future Possibilities**

This final theme explores what my interview participants hope to see in the future for program content.

Rachel discussed the importance of future curricular materials which focus on the topic of critical thinking and “evidence-based decision making,” and specifically getting “them to think about consequences, to debate and be critical … To help them figure out what the right choices for their lives are. That would be fun. That would be important.”
She mentioned this as missing from the current educational materials found in correctional center programs.

Margaret discussed the potential for engaging family members of participants in different take-home literacy tasks. She talked about how this could be an opportunity to bring literacy into the home and share the positive classroom atmosphere with the community. She highlighted this educational opportunity as a way to communicate positive elements of formal education to a community traumatized from residential school experiences. In her interview Margaret mentioned getting students to:

“try reading with (their) parents … so we’re helping with family dynamic stuff, … and also helping with adult literacy and trying to change the family ideas of what education is … because of residential schools they (many participant families) don’t believe in formal education.”

In Dillon’s interview he discussed participant preparation before their release date as an important consideration for future programming. He also suggested services within the correctional system and services on the outside (social services, employment services, housing services, etc.) working together to provide smoother transitions for participants.
Chapter 5: DISCUSSION

In this chapter I discuss the prevalent themes and findings from both my literature review and interviews. The themes have been selected based on pervasiveness in the literature and the interviews conducted, as well as on their relevance to my original research question. The themes are: (1) Existing Programs; (2) Educational Content; (3) Program Strategies and; (4) Educator Training. In each section I will communicate what has been identified as effective practice, and which programs utilize these approaches. The second part of this chapter explores implications and recommendations for educators and educational programs. Lastly, I will suggest avenues for future research in this area.

Existing Programs

Correctional Education Program

Correctional education programs provide opportunities for young offenders to complete their high school degrees. My exploration of correctional facilities revealed these programs as impersonal, standardized, and without instruction. Several structural problems exist within these programs. First the materials administered to the students are completed individually. As these programs are based on individual completion there is no opportunity for group work or alternative educational methods such as student-centered learning or arts-based learning. This is a barrier to student engagement and does not account for student learning exceptionalities and other diverse needs. There is no opportunity for the instructor to provide feedback as the instructor’s role is primarily to collect and distribute workbooks. As a result, feedback is already imbedded into the material itself. The arts are not taught in correctional facilities, as they tend to focus on
educational “basics” such as math, English, and geography. Finally, the environment in which the lessons are administered is highly controlled with guards present.

**Prison Education Program**

Several different prison programs were discussed in the articles “Teaching Behind Bars” and “Can’t Read? Go to Jail!” These programs were portrayed as highly controlled environments where students had the opportunity to finish their high school diploma and heighten their chances of attaining employment upon release. The educators showcased in this article described their programming as repetitive and computer based. Instructors discussed conversations with individual students about progress and the ongoing struggle to build student confidence.

**Drop-in Centers**

The drop-in centers discussed in my research utilized an informal learning environment where alternative programming is provided alongside life skills learning and community building. Alternative programming in these environments included outdoor cultural activities such as attending an indigenous sun dance or going to a sweat lodge. This program notably incorporated visual arts learning and game-based learning. These methods helped participants share personal experiences and develop trust with the instructors. Life skill learning in this program included computer skills, systems literacy, and home maintenance. These activities took place in both group and individual settings.
Long-Term Programs

Two long-term programs were explored in my research, both the gang exit strategy program and the arts entrepreneurship program. In these programs, themes of trust building and life skill learning were prevalent. Trust building in the arts entrepreneurship program was manifested through the establishment of a relationship between the educator and the program participants. Specifically, the instructors communicated their high expectations to the students, but did not show disappointment and withheld judgment in the cases where students did not meet those expectations. This demonstrated educator awareness of program participant progress and the communication of support for continued student progress. Prioritizing relationship building in the gang exit program was described as the process of establishing strong and meaningful relationships and new positive circles of support. These programs exemplified the type of positive community building and engaging methodology recommended in the literature.

Educational Program Content

Life Skills Education

Through my research and interviews, I found life skills education to be considered important and highly effective when educating young offenders. This type of content directly relates to the students’ everyday lives and future employment opportunities. The relatedness of this content ensures student engagement while encouraging students to develop autonomy (Cotronea & McKinney, 2011, p.186). As mentioned in Margaret’s interview, incorporating life skills learning also acknowledges and responds to realistic student needs.
The life skills taught in these programs include: critical thinking development; public speaking; financial literacy; budget making; marketing; systems literacy; and household maintenance. These life skills were taught in both long-term programs, such as the arts entrepreneurship and gang exit program, as well as in the drop-in center. No life skill learning was discussed in either the correctional education program or the prison education program.

Program Strategies

Alternative Methods

In my interview research I found alternative program methods to be highly effective. These were highlighted in both my interview with Margaret and Dillon. She discussed both arts-based and outdoor learning to be engaging and enjoyable for students. Arts-based learning was discussed as a method that helped participants communicate their experiences and ease into the learning environment. Outdoor programming provided opportunities for active education, as Margaret illustrated with the example of going on hikes, and culturally relevant experiences, such as attending a sweat lodge. These activities helped program participants enjoy their time in the program and build a sense of community. Again, alternative methods were not discussed in the correctional or prison programs.

Encouraging Student Empowerment and Autonomy

A notable characteristic of the young offender population, as found in the literature review, is low self-esteem. To help engage students and develop their self-efficacy, the learning environment should be one where students feel competent and
autonomous. Encouragement and positive reinforcement is described as a method for educators to support student empowerment. In Margaret’s interview she discussed encouraging program participants to attempt to solve problems or make sense of legal documents before receiving support. This is intended to encourage the development of participant empowerment and autonomy rather than a sense of helplessness. Education through affective learning is also useful as a tool and allows for students to express their personal connections and opinions as part of the learning environment. When discussing social systems and structures, an educator should provide opportunities for students to share their personal experiences and consider the high incidence of discrimination amongst this student population.

*Using Content that Makes Sense*

When students feel connected to the program subject matter they will be more engaged. This can be accomplished by getting to know program participants and using high-interest topics. In her interview, Margaret commented on the importance of meeting the program participants at their level and utilizing techniques, such as slang words, to communicate a willingness to relate to, and understand, the participants. This shows efforts to understand the program participant’s interests and needs while working to keep the program relevant. This approach echoes the points raised in “Reading Can Help Young Offenders,” which advocates for the use of literacy materials appropriate for students. An example of this would be a book that is both at a lower reading level and contains young adult content, making it relevant for a young offender with a low reading level.
**Program Culture**

An effective and positive program environment is described as: predictable; flexible; warm; and trusting. Predictability is important, as it allows for the program to be a constant, dependable element in program participant’s lives. Margaret discussed the need for participants to experience regularity in the program and activity hours.

While program regularity is important, it must also be noted that educators should be flexible to sudden changes that may occur when working with young offenders. This flexibility allows educators to accommodate the participant’s sometimes unstable lives, which also helps to avoid educator burn out.

Creating a warm and trusting environment allows students to take risks in their learning and not fear embarrassment or ridicule. It also allows for a sense of accountability and connectivity with the educator and the learning environment. In her interview Margaret discussed the importance of educators withholding judgement in the program. Margaret described this approach as not “setting the bar low. It’s that you’re with them wherever they arrive that day. You’re setting the bar higher than they think they can because you believe in them, more than they believe in themselves, and they feel that.” In Dillon’s interview he also discussed the importance of facilitating program participant circles of trust and support. Both the long-term and the drop-in center programming embraced these positive program cultures. There was mention of providing students with positive feedback in the prison program, however, these elements were not present in the correctional education program discussed.
Educator Training

Educator training continues to be an area in need of development and support. According to the literature reviewed, teacher training for young offender programs follow the same standards as training for kindergarten to grade 12. As the demographic, program context, and student needs in young offender programs are often quite different from mainstream schools, this training leaves many educators unprepared for the realities of these programs and their students. These settings require educators who are highly adaptable, able to build community in the classroom, develop trusting relationships with students, appreciate student realities and lived experiences, and provide individualized programming to a population with a high incidence of learning disabilities. In the correctional facility program, the lack of adequately trained teachers was most apparent. Rachel described instructors in such programs as not necessarily certified teachers. Prior to entering young offender programs, teachers should receive training that targets the skills needed to work in such environments.

Implications and Recommendations for Future Practice

As found in this study, young offender educational programs are far from uniform. The structure, strategies, and culture of the learning environments all vary greatly from one program to another. In considering this I appreciate that no one strategy or theme can be applied across the board. That being said, this study has brought to light numerous positive strategies for young offender programming:

- Programs should provide opportunities for students to develop self-esteem. This encourages student engagement and confidence for future stages of life.
• *Learning environments should strive to be positive and trusting.* A positive environment invites student participation and can be utilized for positive classroom management.

• *Alternative learning methods should be explored in programming.* Outdoor or arts-based learning can work to include students who otherwise would find themselves on the periphery.

• *Educational content should be relevant and related to program participant’s lives.* This encourages student participation and engagement. If teachers are unable to familiarize themselves with student interests, they may implement choice in the program. For example, educators could provide students with several options when completing assignments. Moreover, students are more likely to relate to content that is relevant in their everyday lives. An example of this is life skill learning.

• *Programs should strive to be flexible in their delivery and predictable in their scheduling.* Flexibility accounts for the transience of the young offender community, while predictability allows for programming to play a grounding role in participant lives.

• *Educators in alternative programming, such as Section 23 schools, should receive specific training.* This can provide support to teachers when working with students who are largely affected by learning disabilities, systemic discrimination, and educational disengagement.
Areas for Further Study

This study reveals that more research is needed on effective teacher training and positive program strategies in correctional facilities. Furthermore, this study’s limitations, such as a lack of student perspective and a lack of Section 23 program explored, highlights further areas for exploration. I have included a list of considerations for future research. Areas for further study include:

- **Community building strategies.** How do educators working with young offenders develop community building in the program? How can educators negotiate this priority while maintaining security standards at correctional and prison facilities?

- **Classroom management.** How can educators institute effective classroom management while protecting student self-efficacy? How might an educator navigate this with different communities?

- **Teacher training.** Are there examples of effective teacher training for young offender programs in different provinces? Countries?

Conclusion

This study sought to identify a variety of educational programming for young offenders and to highlight effective strategies. Programs for young offenders in Ontario vary widely in their form and function. Prison and correctional facilities often provide formal and often restrictive learning environments. As security is a main concern in these programs, the classrooms are hyper controlled and instruction is often kept to a minimum. Long-term programming and drop-in centers were found to be more personal and thoughtful. Educators were able to develop positive relationships with program
participants while also crafting the material to suit student needs. Many alternative programs for young offenders are incorporated under Section 23. These aim to provide students with opportunities for learning and rehabilitation. An effective classroom incorporates positive atmosphere, alternative methodology, high-interest student topics, and relatable content. While these programs are highly effective, others leave much to be desired. This study aims to showcase how education can be rehabilitative, and what strategies educators can employ to engage young offenders in learning. Through improving such programs we can better support the needs of these students and provide them with greater opportunities for their futures.
REFERENCES


Toronto District School Board Section 23 Programs. (2014). Retrieved From: http://www.tdsb.on.ca/EarlyYears/SpecialEducation/Programs.aspx


APPENDICES

Appendix A: Letter of Consent for Interview

Date: ___________________

Dear ___________________,

I am a graduate student at OISE, University of Toronto, and am currently enrolled as a Master of Teaching candidate. I am studying ___________________ for the purposes of investigating an educational topic as a major assignment for our program. I think that your knowledge and experience will provide insights into this topic.

I am writing a report on this study as a requirement of the Master of Teaching Program. My course instructor who is providing support for the process this year is Dr. __________________. My research supervisor is ___________________. The purpose of this requirement is to allow us to become familiar with a variety of ways to do research. My data collection consists of a 40 minute interview that will be tape-recorded. I would be grateful if you would allow me to interview you at a place and time convenient to you. I can conduct the interview at your office or workplace, in a public place, or anywhere else that you might prefer.

The contents of this interview will be used for my assignment, which will include a final paper, as well as informal presentations to my classmates and/or potentially at a conference or publication. I will not use your name or anything else that might identify you in my written work, oral presentations, or publications. This information remains confidential. The only people who will have access to my assignment work will be my research supervisor and my course instructor. You are free to change your mind at any time, and to withdraw even after you have consented to participate. You may decline to answer any specific questions. I will destroy the tape recording after the paper has been presented and/or published which may take up to five years after the data has been collected. There are no known risks or benefits to you for assisting in the project, and I will share with you a copy of my notes to ensure accuracy.

Please sign the attached form, if you agree to be interviewed. The second copy is for your records. Thank you very much for your help.

Yours sincerely,

Researcher name: _________________________________

Phone number, email: ______________________________
Instructor’s Name: ________________________________
Phone number: ___________________ Email: ____________________

Research Supervisor’s Name: ________________________
Phone #: _____________________ Email: ____________________

Consent Form

I acknowledge that the topic of this interview has been explained to me and that any questions that I have asked have been answered to my satisfaction. I understand that I can withdraw at any time without penalty.

I have read the letter provided to me by ________________________ (name of researcher) and agree to participate in an interview for the purposes described.

Signature: ________________________________

Name (printed): ________________________________

Date: ________________
Appendix B: Interview Questions

1. Please describe your experience working as an educator with young offenders.

2. Have you worked as an educator with young offenders in a formal or informal learning environment?
   a. How do you think this might have influenced the effectiveness of the learning environment?

3. Have you worked with youth on an individual basis or as a group?
   a. How do you think this might have influenced the effectiveness of the learning environment?

4. What was the content of your teaching while in this role?
   a. Did you explicitly teach citizenship?

5. What educational strategies and tools did you use?
   a. What role did the arts or arts-based learning play in your teaching?
   b. What role did physical literacy learning play in your teaching?
   c. What role did manufacturing technology (woodworking, machine shop) play in your teaching?
   d. What role did critical thinking play in your teaching?
   e. What role did youth empowerment play in your teaching?
   f. What role did mindfulness play in your teaching?

6. Did you find these educational strategies and tools useful?

7. What challenges did you encounter while working with young offenders?

8. How do you think these types of challenges might be resolved?
9. What do you hope to see in the future of this type of programming?