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Restorative Justice Education Programmes in South African Prisons: The Experience of Phoenix Zululand Facilitators

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Abstract

The contemporary notion of restorative justice began to emerge during the 1970s and 1980s, a period characterised by a growing recognition of the need to reform criminal justice systems that have traditionally prioritised punishment over the rehabilitation of offenders and the reconciliation between offenders and victims. This study investigates the experiences of facilitators at Phoenix Zululand, who implement restorative justice education programmes within correctional facilities. It evaluates the effectiveness of these programmes and examines the challenges facilitators face in their implementation. Using a qualitative research approach grounded in an interpretivist framework and utilising a phenomenological research design, the study involved 10 participants who were selected through a purposive sampling technique. Data analysis was conducted using the thematic analysis technique. The findings indicate that facilitators possess a generally positive perspective regarding restorative justice education programmes in South Africa's correctional facilities, noting benefits for both their professional growth and the rehabilitation of offenders. Nonetheless, challenges were identified, including limited access to facilities and gender dynamics affecting female facilitators. These findings emphasise the critical need for effective policy implementation of restorative justice principles within the correctional system.

Keywords: Education, Inmates, Prison, Recidivism, Rehabilitation, Restorative Justice, South Africa

Introduction

Prison incarceration aims to rehabilitate offenders and deter recidivism, but evidence shows these goals are often unmet (UNODC, 2012). A systematic review of recidivism data from 2008 to mid-2019 indicated that rates among released inmates in 50 countries ranged from 20% to 63% within two years of release (Yukhnenko et al., 2020). Although South Africa does not have official recidivism data, a study by Schoeman (2002) reported that recidivism rates among South African offenders range from 55% to 95%, a figure that remains widely accepted today. These findings highlight the shortcomings of the retributive model-based rehabilitation approach used in most prisons worldwide, emphasising the urgent need for reform.

In South Africa, the criminal justice system has traditionally followed a retributive model, based on the principle that individuals who commit crimes should be apprehended, tried, and punished. However, in recent years, restorative justice initiatives have started to be implemented in the South African criminal justice system. Despite this progress, a study by Batley and Skelton (2019) indicates that the integration of restorative justice principles in South Africa is still minimal. Furthermore, the national policy framework intended to support these initiatives has often been overlooked, resulting in the implementation of restorative justice programmes by various non-governmental organisations (NGOs) (Batley & Skelton, 2019).

This paper analyses the experiences of facilitators at Phoenix Zululand¹ who have implemented restorative justice education programmes in prisons. It assesses the effectiveness of these programmes and explores the challenges faced by facilitators in

¹ Phoenix Zululand is a non-governmental organisation established in 2005, dedicated to addressing the rehabilitation needs of inmates through restorative justice education programmes within the correctional facilities of KwaZulu-Natal Province, South Africa.

implementing them. The study aims to enhance understanding of restorative justice education programmes within the correctional system and to contribute to the broader discourse on their potential positive effects on offender rehabilitation.

Most research on restorative justice education programmes has primarily focused on their implementation in school settings. In school environments, these programmes are designed to address conflicts and provide alternatives to traditional disciplinary methods, which often rely heavily on punitive measures (Lodi et al, 2021). In contrast, this study distinguishes itself from others by focusing on the implementation of restorative justice education programmes in correctional facilities. This focus represents a notable shift from the existing literature, which primarily addresses the functioning of restorative justice programmes in educational settings. Therefore, this research makes a valuable contribution to the body of knowledge on the integration of restorative justice education programmes in prison settings, a topic that has not been extensively investigated to date.

To clearly present the objectives of this study, the paper begins with a review of the existing literature related to the topic. Following the literature review, the research methodology is outlined, detailing the research approach, design, sampling method, and data analysis technique used in the study. The following sections present the findings and discuss the results. Lastly, the paper concludes with a summary of the main points and offers policy recommendations.

Literature Review

Understanding restorative justice

The development and application of restorative justice as a framework for addressing crime and conflict vary significantly across regions worldwide. The contemporary understanding of restorative justice began to emerge in the 1970s and 1980s, a period characterised by a growing recognition of the need to reform criminal justice systems that had traditionally focused on punitive measures rather than rehabilitation and reconciliation (Fiedor et al., 2026). This evolution was greatly influenced by grassroots movements and academic initiatives aimed at humanising the criminal justice system, highlighting the importance of healing for both victims and offenders.

Restorative justice is a collaborative process that involves those who have suffered harm, those responsible for the harm, and community members working together to right the wrongs and restore justice in a way that respects everyone involved (Döger-Şenel & Çetin, 2025). According to Winslade (2018), restorative justice is a transformative approach in the criminal justice system that includes all parties affected by a specific crime: the victim, the offender, and the community. This approach allows them to collectively identify and address the harm caused, recognise their needs, and acknowledge their responsibilities to one another. Furthermore, Zehr (2015) offers an alternative perspective, describing restorative justice as a means of restoring balance and improving circumstances to make them as positive as possible. This approach emphasises repairing the harm done by the crime and reintegrating individuals into society. Through these collaborative efforts, restorative justice seeks to mend relationships, promote accountability, and ultimately improve social cohesion.

During the late 20th century, particularly in the 1980s and 1990s, many countries began systematically integrating restorative practices into their criminal justice systems as alternatives to conventional punitive measures, marking a significant shift toward more rehabilitative approaches (Gade, 2018; Hermann, 2017). The growing acknowledgement is evident in the diverse and innovative implementations of restorative justice worldwide. For instance, in Australia, certain jurisdictions have effectively integrated restorative justice practices into the formal justice system, thereby harmonising restorative principles with traditional legal processes (Richards, 2010). In contrast, restorative justice initiatives in the United Kingdom and the United States of America (USA) predominantly function as community-driven programmes that collaborate closely with existing legal frameworks (Nicholson, et al., 2025).

In South Africa, the principles of restorative justice have been formally integrated into the national criminal justice framework, particularly through the provisions of the Child Justice Act. This legislation emphasises the rehabilitation of juvenile offenders, reflecting a broader commitment to restorative practices within the criminal justice system (Makiwane, 2015). The approach aims to divert juvenile offenders from incarceration and

to reduce the severity of sentences by prioritising healing and reconciliation over traditional punitive measures.

Most restorative justice programmes in South Africa are implemented primarily in community settings, focusing on offenders released on parole or under probation (Louw & van Wyk, 2016). However, in recent years, there has been a significant shift toward integrating restorative justice education programmes within correctional facilities. The primary objective of this shift is to promote active reflection among inmates regarding the consequences of their actions and to encourage accountability for the harm they have caused (Louw & van Wyk, 2016).

Restorative justice principles can be applied at any stage of the criminal justice system. However, some critics argue that the widespread adoption of restorative justice programmes has diminished their effectiveness. This decline poses a risk to the foundational principles and historical identity of these practices (Wood & Suzuki, 2016). Wood and Suzuki (2016) suggest that contemporary restorative justice practices are being stretched to their theoretical limits, evolving into a concept that tries to be everything to everybody.

This expansion has been driven by the integration of restorative justice into various legal theories, frameworks, and initiatives (Wood & Suzuki, 2016). To maintain its relevance and effectiveness, restorative justice must realign with its core objectives: providing meaningful redress for victims, promoting accountability and rehabilitation for offenders, and encouraging community engagement in the justice process. Wood and Suzuki (2016) highlight that achieving the complex objectives of restorative justice requires a profound and nuanced understanding of the multifaceted realities surrounding crime and the criminal justice system.

Prison-based restorative justice education programmes

Prison-based restorative justice education programmes are gaining recognition as effective frameworks for promoting accountability among offenders. These initiatives are structured to encourage inmates to recognise and accept responsibility for their actions (Toews, 2013). The overarching aim is to facilitate healing and restoration, thereby enabling offenders to address and repair the harm inflicted upon victims and their communities. According to van Ness (2007) and Toews (2013), restorative justice education programmes may include programmes such as Victim Awareness Programmes, Victim-Offender Mediation Programmes, and Conflict Resolution Programmes.

Victim awareness programme

The victim awareness programme is specifically designed to advance a deeper understanding among inmates regarding the profound effects that crime has on victims. Recognising that many incarcerated individuals often possess a limited awareness of this impact, the underlying foundation of this programme is that cultivating a greater awareness of the trauma inflicted on victims may encourage inmates to rethink their attitudes and reduce their likelihood of future criminal behaviour (Stamatakis & Christophe, 2013).

The victim awareness programme adopts a structured approach to educate inmates about the ramifications of crime without the need for direct interaction with victims (Johnstone et al., 2007). A notable example of this programme is the “Focus on Victims” programme, implemented in Hamburg, Germany. This programme spans the initial three months of a prisoner’s incarceration, providing a crucial period for reflection and learning. It encourages participants to engage in various exercises to enhance their understanding of victimisation. It encourages inmates to contemplate the experiences of individuals they know who have suffered as victims of crime, as well as to reflect on any personal experiences they may have had as victims themselves (Hagemann, 2003).

Another example is the Sycamore Tree Programme (STP), which operates in 125 countries and is linked nationally through Prison Fellowship International (PFI) (Liebmann, 2010). PFI developed the STP in 1996, and its objectives are to meet the needs of both inmates and victims of crimes who participate (Liebmann, 2010). With regard to inmates, the goals include: encouraging them to take responsibility for their actions; enabling them to experience confession, repentance, forgiveness, and reconciliation regarding their offences; and helping them make amends through participation in symbolic

acts of restitution (Hagemann, 2003). With regard to victims, the aims include: helping them resolve issues related to the offence committed against them; helping them become better informed about crime, offenders, and restorative justice; enabling them to see offenders take responsibility for their offending; and helping them gain a sense of closure, forgiveness, and peace (Feasey & Williams, 2009). A key part of the course involves victims telling their stories of how the crimes committed against them affected their lives. In the final session, prisoners may make symbolic restitution (Feasey & Williams, 2009).

Victim-offender mediation programme

A victim-offender mediation programme is a restorative justice process that brings together victims and offenders. The programme focuses on repairing the harm caused by the crime. It allows victims to share how the crime has affected them, obtain answers to their questions, and seek restitution (Murhula & Tolla, 2021). At the same time, offenders take direct responsibility for their actions and demonstrate accountability (Murhula & Tolla, 2021). An example of victim-offender mediation programmes is the programme developed in the state of Texas, in the USA, which was established in response to requests from victims of violent crimes (van Ness, 2007). Most participants who take part in this programme are individuals serving lengthy prison sentences, with some even residing on death row.

The mediation process starts at the victim's request and is characterised by an extensive preparation phase. This preparation is conducted with the assistance of trained mediators. They work diligently to ensure that both victims and offenders are mentally and emotionally prepared for the potentially challenging conversations ahead (Jonas-van Dijk et al., 2020). The core objective of this process is to allow both parties to share their narratives regarding the crime and its consequences (van Ness, 2007). In doing so, victims seek a sense of closure and healing, while offenders have an opportunity to apologise for their actions. Through this exchange, the programme aims to promote healing and understanding, contributing to a transformative experience for both victims and offenders (Jonas-van Dijk et al., 2020).

Furthermore, another goal of the mediation process is to promote reconciliation between offenders and their victims (Barrabas et al., 2012). This approach is seen as beneficial for both parties. Offenders, particularly those about to be released, often feel a need to resolve issues related to their actions and the impact on the victim or the victim's family in cases of homicide. They may wish to express their remorse, but have not had the opportunity to do so. Additionally, they may seek to understand how the victim feels about them (Johnstone, 2016).

On the other hand, victims have various needs that must be fulfilled for them to recover from the trauma of their victimisation (Bright, 2017). Advocates of restorative justice typically identify four key needs that victims require for healing: the need for answers to questions about the incident (some of which only the offender can address); the need to express their feelings and have those feelings validated; the need for empowerment, which involves regaining control over their lives; and the need for reassurance regarding their future safety again, a need often best met through direct reassurances from the offender especially in cases related to gender-based violence (Strang, 2002; Zehr, 2005).

Conflict resolution programmes

Conflict resolution programmes in prisons aim to reduce recidivism by incorporating restorative justice practices, mediation, and emotional regulation training (Millana et al., 2020). These programmes equip inmates with essential skills for managing their emotions, particularly anger, and developing empathy (Teasdale & Britain, 2015). Through workshops, participants enhance their self-awareness and emotional intelligence, which is the ability to perceive, understand, manage, and effectively utilise emotions in themselves and others. Furthermore, peer mediation promotes leadership among inmates, thereby promoting a collaborative and secure environment (Lang, 2024). These programmes seek to transform inmate dynamics and facilitate successful reintegration into society after release.

A notable example of conflict resolution programmes is the Alternatives to Violence Project (AVP), which was originally developed by Quakers in collaboration with incarcerated individuals in New York during the 1970s (Tennier, 1999). Since its inception,

AVP has expanded globally and is offered in various institutional settings worldwide. The programme empowers participants by helping them identify situations that could escalate into violence. They are trained in essential communication skills that enhance their ability to manage conflicts constructively, thereby reducing the likelihood of aggressive encounters (Potter-Daniau, 2025). Through interactive workshops, inmates engage in role-playing scenarios that advance self-awareness and empathy.

Although AVP is not directly linked to the principles of restorative justice, it encompasses essential restorative values, including accountability, empathy, and community involvement. By emphasising personal transformation, AVP promotes a rehabilitative approach that reduces violent behaviour among inmates and facilitates a deeper understanding of interpersonal relationships and conflict resolution (John, 2016). This connection to restorative justice principles underlines the potential of such programmes to create a more supportive environment for positive change within the prison system.

Models of Phoenix Zululand restorative justice education programmes

Phoenix Zululand's restorative justice education programmes operate within prison settings, prioritising transformative education as a key component of their approach. These programmes create a structured and secure environment where incarcerated individuals can share their personal life stories and reflect on their attitudes and behaviours (Ndaba, 2020). This process of open dialogue raises a sense of community and understanding among inmates, facilitating significant personal transformation (Harris, 2014). By focusing on shared experiences, inmates can reflect on their actions, understand the consequences of their decisions, and cultivate empathy for others.

This rehabilitative approach is the guiding philosophy of Phoenix Zululand, aiming to empower prisoners and encourage positive changes that extend beyond prison walls. Programmes at Phoenix Zululand, such as "Phoenix Rising," "Conversations in Families", and "Family Conferencing", are designed to restore self-worth and dignity among inmates while rebuilding relationships between them and their families (Argall, 2017).

Phoenix Rising involves group discussions and self-disclosure among prisoners, focusing on themes of personal responsibility and growth. The programme is led by a peer facilitator, and Phoenix Zululand employs former offenders to run it. As prisoners approach the end of their sentences, those who have successfully completed Phoenix Rising may join Conversations in Families (Zondi, 2014). This initiative addresses family life and responsibility topics, including conflict resolution and fatherhood. In the final months leading up to a prisoner's release, Family Conferences are arranged (Harris, 2014).

Family conferences utilise the concept of reintegrative shaming, among other tools. The process begins with prisoners sharing the story of the crime for which they were convicted. They have been prepared for this moment through their participation in programmes such as Phoenix Rising and Conversations in Families, which encourage self-disclosure (Harris, 2014). Family members then share how the incident and its repercussions have impacted their lives. This allows prisoners to experience feelings of shame and remorse. However, the process ultimately has uplifting effects for the prisoners. It is emphasised that it is the prisoner's behaviour that is shameful, not the individual themselves (Zondi, 2014). The prisoner is then given the opportunity to repair the harm caused by their actions by apologising to their family, seeking their forgiveness, and committing to change their behaviour (Harris, 2014). This enables them to distance themselves from the actions that led to their incarceration while still taking responsibility for those actions.

Methodology

Research approach and design

This study utilised a qualitative research approach. A qualitative research approach focuses on understanding social realities, human behaviour, attitudes, and experiences through non-numerical data (Tenny et al., 2025). Scholars argue that this approach enables researchers to engage deeply with the phenomena under study, leading to a comprehensive understanding of the subject matter (Aspers & Corte, 2021). Given its qualitative nature, this study is grounded in an interpretivist paradigm. This paradigm is particularly suitable for exploring the complexities of human experiences and

understanding how people interpret their interactions (Alharahsheh & Pius, 2020). Using the qualitative research approach, facilitators at Phoenix Zululand shared their lived experiences of facilitating restorative programmes in prisons, offering valuable insights into both the obstacles they faced and the successes they achieved.

Furthermore, this study employed a phenomenological research design. A phenomenological research design seeks to uncover the meanings individuals assign to their lived experiences, thereby enabling researchers to gain a deeper understanding of how individuals interpret and make sense of diverse phenomena (Corby et al., 2015). In this study, a phenomenological design was particularly beneficial because the primary objective was to examine the experiences of facilitators at Phoenix Zululand who have implemented restorative justice education programmes in correctional facilities. By using this design, the study aimed to capture the complex dynamics of the facilitators' experiences, highlighting their reflections, challenges, and the transformative effects of restorative justice within the correctional environment.

Sampling technique, recruitment procedure, and data collection method

The study utilised purposive sampling, a non-probability sampling technique in which researchers deliberately select participants based on predetermined criteria that closely align with the study's specific aims and objectives (Andrade, 2021). This sampling technique is subject to the researcher's expertise, judgment, and contextual understanding of the subject matter. Therefore, in this study, participants were selected from facilitators who were actively engaged in conducting restorative education programmes at Phoenix Zululand. A total of 10 participants were selected for this study. Participant recruitment occurred in 2021, during the second wave of COVID-19. Due to safety concerns and social distancing measures in place at the time, the recruitment process was conducted telephonically. Each call aimed to provide comprehensive information about the study and to address any questions or concerns participants may have regarding their involvement. Table 1 below provides key information about the participants.

| Participant Code | Gender | Age | Experience as PZ facilitator (years) |
|-------------------------|---------------|------------|---|
| F1 | Female | 28 | 1 |
| F2 | Male | 32 | 2.5 |
| F3 | Female | 35 | 4 |
| F4 | Female | 54 | 15 |
| F5 | Female | 34 | 3 months |
| F6 | Female | 57 | 13 |
| F7 | Female | 60 | 16 |
| F8 | Male | 38 | 2 months |
| F9 | Male | 58 | 6 |
| F10 | Male | 35 | 1.5 |

Table 1 Information related to the participants

In-depth, semi-structured interviews were used as a data collection method. This method was used to gain a comprehensive understanding of the facilitators' experiences. By employing this qualitative data collection method, the researcher asked open-ended questions, allowing participants to express their views on the topic under investigation. Each interview was structured to last approximately 50 minutes and was audio recorded with the participants' consent. Due to the challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic in 2021, the interviews were conducted via telephone to adhere to safety protocols of the time and to provide participants the convenience of engaging from their own locations.

Data analysis

The data were analysed utilising thematic analysis, a qualitative research method designed to identify and interpret patterns or themes within a dataset (Elliott, 2018). Thematic analysis enables researchers to interpret unstructured qualitative data effectively, converting sources such as raw interviews and field notes into a coherent narrative that addresses their research questions. Given the qualitative nature of the data collected from a relatively small sample, thematic analysis emerged as the most suitable

analytical framework for this research. Through this data analysis method, the study gained valuable insights into facilitators' perceptions of their realities and the meanings they attribute to their experiences.

For the analysis, the collected data were organised by transcribing each interview verbatim and following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase thematic analysis process. This includes (i) familiarising with the data, (ii) generating initial codes, (iii) collating codes, (iv) grouping codes into themes, (v) reviewing and refining themes, and (vi) producing the report (Braun & Clarke, 2006). From the analysis, two main themes emerged, each reflecting the facilitators' perspectives and experiences. The first theme, Experiences of Facilitators, focused on the diverse and nuanced experiences of facilitators as they engage with the Phoenix Zululand restorative education programmes. The second theme, Facilitators' Perceptions of the Outcomes of the Phoenix Zululand Programmes, explores how facilitators interpret and evaluate the impacts of the programmes, thus providing insights into their perceptions of the effectiveness of the programme.

Findings

Theme 1: The experiences of facilitators

Under Theme 1, two sub-themes were documented: Benefits of Being a Facilitator and Challenges faced by Facilitators.

Sub-theme 1: Benefits of being a facilitator

This sub-theme focuses on the main benefits that participants have experienced as facilitators. Most of them felt that taking on these roles improved their knowledge and skills. They reported that guiding discussions and helping participants learn have deepened their understanding of restorative justice education programmes and also improved their communication skills. This experience has played a significant role in their personal and professional development, as stated by F6:

I have learnt a lot of things, mostly is to interact with other people and to share experiences. Know how to share my own experiences... I learnt to share and tell them my own story... Also, to hear people talking about their own experiences

For Participant F10, assuming the role of a facilitator opened his eyes to perspectives he had not previously considered. This experience revealed to him that individuals possess the capacity to engage in actions and behaviours that he had previously deemed unimaginable. Through his interactions, he witnessed the diverse motivations and circumstances that drive people, challenging his assumptions and expanding his understanding of human potential. This new perception profoundly impacted his worldview, prompting him to reflect on the complexities of human nature and many factors that shape people's decisions:

It made me see the world differently, I was shocked about the stories I heard in prison. To see that people are not the same ... also it made me see that people can do harsh things that I have never thought a person can do. (F10)

For another participant, F7, the advantages included a valuable opportunity to engage with new perspectives and innovative concepts, as well as the chance to shape meaningful relationships and expand his network. These connections encourage collaboration and also serve as a catalyst for his professional growth:

If you are working for Phoenix Zululand, after attending some workshops [trainings] you get certificates ... it improves your knowledge, improves your mindset, you get to know different people, it's so nice. You get exposed to different things; you go...you meet people. (F7)

The commitment and dedication of participants serving as Phoenix Zululand facilitators led to significant improvements in their communication skills. By engaging in meaningful conversations with offenders, the facilitators gained a deeper understanding of human behaviour and the complexities within the justice system. These interactions provided valuable insights into the diverse motivations and challenges individuals face, fostering a renewed optimism about the potential for positive change. The facilitators came to believe

strongly in the transformative power of rehabilitation, recognising that everyone has the capacity for growth and redemption, regardless of their past.

Sub-theme 2: Challenges faced by facilitators

The primary challenge encountered by facilitators was securing access to prison facilities. Access was frequently denied by the wardens, who provided little to no justification for their decisions. This challenge was highlighted by F1, who noted that facilitators often faced arbitrary restrictions, complicating their efforts to implement necessary programmes and support for the prisoners. Such barriers hindered the facilitators' work and affected the overall effectiveness of rehabilitation initiatives within the prison system.

Female facilitators faced specific challenges while working with male prisoners, which underscored the complexities of their roles in a predominantly male environment. All female participants agreed with the observations made by facilitator F3, who remarked, "As a female facilitator, I am working with male offenders who can be rude. They often treat me as if I were their girlfriend, even though that's not how I see myself". Facilitator F5 also noted, "You know how male prisoners behave...yelling and making all sorts of remarks. Sometimes, they don't take you seriously, which makes it difficult to engage with people who don't respect you". The participants acknowledged that these challenges included issues related to respect and potential gender-related tensions.

Theme 2: Facilitators' perceptions of the outcomes of the Phoenix Zululand programmes

The findings reveal that most facilitators perceive Phoenix Zululand programmes as highly effective in fostering personal transformation among prisoners. Participants emphasised that these programmes facilitate meaningful changes in behaviour and attitudes. Moreover, the facilitators noted improvements in prisoners' relationships with their families, emphasising the importance of familial support during reintegration. By addressing communication barriers and promoting emotional connection, the programmes nurture healthier family dynamics, which are essential for successful reintegration into society after release from prison.

In addition to these individual and familial benefits, the facilitators acknowledge a broader societal advantage stemming from the effectiveness of Phoenix Zululand programmes: a noticeable reduction in recidivism rates. By equipping offenders with the tools to transform their lives, these programmes contribute to individuals' personal success, to community safety, and to reducing the overall burden on the criminal justice system. The focus on personal and societal outcomes underscores the holistic approach of Phoenix Zululand, reinforcing its value in the rehabilitation landscape, as stated by F2:

You see the programme itself it is like a [one] month programme. What it does it goes deep into a person and touches them. Because with this programme every session allows an inmate to speak... It actually helps them with their self-esteem, self-confidence and with their self-beliefs, because we are here to listen to their stories without judging them... We try to make them see that there are other ways of making a living without having to commit a crime and be on the wrong side of the law.

The second key aspect of the Phoenix Zululand programmes is their focus on promoting prisoners' self-awareness of the impact of their behaviour on others. By engaging participants in reflective exercises and discussions, these programmes encourage individuals to consider the consequences of their actions for victims and their families and communities. This awareness is crucial in helping prisoners understand the ripple effects of their choices, ultimately guiding them toward more responsible decision-making in the future, as stated by participant F2:

It helps the prisoners to reflect and [to] take responsibility for their crimes and actions and know the effect it caused, not only to the victim and victims' families but also to their families. The main objective of this programme is for the inmate to reflect and take responsibility for their actions, to know the problem, and to own their crimes and to ask for forgiveness.

When evaluating the impact of the Phoenix Zululand programmes on reducing recidivism rates, facilitators provided an overall positive perspective. However, they emphasised that the success of these programmes largely depends on the personal motivation of each

inmate. One facilitator, F6, clearly stated that the effectiveness of the interventions primarily relies on the individual's willingness to apply the skills they learn. This insight highlights the complex relationship between the support provided by the programmes and inmates' personal commitment to change their lives. While the tools and guidance offered are invaluable, the ultimate decision to embrace change rests with each inmate.

Discussion

The first theme highlights the significant benefits experienced by Phoenix Zululand facilitators, including personal growth and improved communication skills, which reflect the transformative nature of their roles. Furthermore, Facilitators F6 and F10 shared personal narratives that reveal how their engagements with inmates have changed their initial beliefs about justice and rehabilitation. Their experiences as facilitators pushed them to reevaluate their views on crime, criminal justice, offender rehabilitation, and how relationships can be restored after a crime has occurred. It raises an important question about whether facilitating restorative justice education programmes can change facilitators' perspectives and lead to a broader societal reconsideration of justice.

While the above insights obtained from participants are significant; however, it is essential to recognise that these findings may not be universally applicable. According to Sharma (2023), individual experiences are significantly shaped by personal backgrounds and specific contextual factors. Therefore, while facilitators at Phoenix Zululand may experience considerable growth and transformation, those affiliated with other organisations and who facilitate restorative justice programmes in prisons may not undergo a similar degree of development.

The findings highlight several significant challenges faced by facilitators that need to be addressed. One pressing concern is the limited access to prison facilities, which raises important questions about the priorities of prison authorities. Specifically, it calls into question whether prison authorities prioritise maintaining control and security over the rehabilitation of inmates. This perspective contrasts with the principles outlined in the 2005 White Paper on Corrections in South Africa. The White Paper proposed a transformative vision for the correctional system, advocating for a shift from a purely punitive framework to one that emphasises rehabilitation (Department of Correctional Services, 2005). The goal is to reduce recidivism rates by reimagining prisons as correctional centres dedicated to rehabilitating offenders and facilitating their successful reintegration into society (Department of Correctional Services, 2005).

Furthermore, the challenges faced by female facilitators, as highlighted by F3 and F5, reveal important complexities that must not be ignored. In the context of gender-related tensions, it is crucial to understand that many traditional African cultures define gender roles based on established societal norms and functions that have evolved over generations (Khosa-Nkatini et al., 2023). This culturally specific framework shapes the perception of the roles of males and females within a particular community (Ngulube, 2018). In predominantly patriarchal societies, traditional norms often prevent a woman from advising a man on appropriate behaviour, especially when the woman is younger than the man. Consequently, male inmates from strong patriarchal backgrounds may feel discomfort or resentment when female facilitators are assigned to lead their rehabilitation programmes.

The second theme of the research examines facilitators' perceptions of rehabilitation programmes for offenders within restorative justice education programmes. The findings reveal a strong consensus among facilitators about the programmes' effectiveness in advancing personal transformation among inmates. They noted that these programmes lead to significant changes in the behaviours and attitudes of both inmates and their families, thereby improving familial support during reintegration.

This support is vital as inmates transition back into society. This finding aligns with previous studies that demonstrate the importance of restorative justice rehabilitation programmes, particularly in facilitating personal transformation and fostering supportive family relationships (Mpofu et al., 2022). Research has shown that effective rehabilitation programmes can lead to meaningful behavioural and attitudinal changes among inmates, thereby facilitating their reintegration into society (Skinner-Osei & Osei, 2024).

Beyond individual and familial developments, facilitators noted a broader societal benefit associated with the effectiveness of the Phoenix Zululand restorative justice

education programmes. Facilitators have observed a notable decrease in recidivism rates among inmates who engaged in these programmes. By providing essential life skills and promoting personal accountability, these programmes support inmate success, enhance community safety, and reduce the burden on the criminal justice system. However, facilitators highlighted the crucial role of personal motivation in the rehabilitation process. While the programmes provide essential tools and insights, their success largely depends on the inmates' readiness to embrace change. As one facilitator stated, an inmate's mindset significantly influences whether they apply the skills learned in real-life situations.

It is essential to recognise that personal motivation plays a critical role in the successful rehabilitation of offenders. Research indicates that personal motivation is a more reliable predictor of post-treatment outcomes than the specific interventions implemented (Gideon, 2010). In the context of this study on facilitators conducting restorative justice education programmes at Phoenix Zululand, while their role as external motivators is instrumental in initiating the rehabilitation process, internal motivation, stemming from an offender's genuine desire to change, is vital for sustaining long-term abstinence from criminal behaviour (McMurrin, Sellen, & Campbell, 2011). This innate drive empowers offenders to take ownership of their rehabilitation journeys, fostering resilience and commitment that cannot be achieved solely through external influences.

Conclusion

The study examines the efficacy and challenges of restorative justice education programmes implemented in South African prisons by facilitators from Phoenix Zululand. The findings of this research indicate that facilitators maintain a positive perspective towards these programmes, particularly concerning their own professional development and the rehabilitation of incarcerated individuals. However, various challenges remain, notably restricted access to correctional facilities, which raises concerns about the prioritisation of security measures over rehabilitative initiatives. This circumstance contrasts greatly with the recommendations presented in the 2005 White Paper, which advocates for a shift from punitive methodologies to rehabilitative practices. Furthermore, the challenges encountered by female facilitators in delivering restorative justice education programmes to male offenders underline significant and complex gender dynamics. These difficulties may stem from societal stereotypes and biases that often affect the perception of women in leading roles, particularly in a patriarchal society.

The findings of this study have significant implications for the development of policies on restorative justice education programmes in South African correctional facilities. Given that the 2005 White Paper on Corrections emphasises the importance of integrating restorative justice into the correctional system, it is crucial for policymakers to effectively implement these principles within the national correctional policy framework. Furthermore, the study highlights the essential role of facilitators in the success of restorative justice initiatives in offender rehabilitation. Therefore, it is essential to develop comprehensive training programmes that equip facilitators of restorative justice education programmes across South Africa with the necessary skills to deliver these programmes effectively and professionally. Lastly, it is crucial for policymakers to encourage collaboration among prison management, non-governmental organisations, and other stakeholders, as this is vital to developing a cohesive strategy for implementing restorative justice education programmes in prisons and to avoid the issue, as stipulated by some participants in this study, of facilitators being denied access to prisons.

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