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'Challenging' Educational Journeys: How do Children and Young People Experience Education in Prison and Secure Settings?

by

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Abstract

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Every child, including those in prison and secure settings, has the right to an education. While existing research often focuses on education's role in reducing reoffending, there is a gap in the literature concerning children and young people's (CYP's) experience of education in these contexts. In this thesis, I explore CYP's views and experiences of education in prison and secure settings through two research enquiries, with the aim of understanding what makes a meaningful education for these CYP.

In Chapter Two, I describe a systematic review and thematic synthesis of ten studies that explored how CYP, aged 18 and under, experience education in prison and secure settings. Qualitative and mixed-method studies were included. I inferred that CYP felt hopeful that education could transform their lives. However, they also experienced psychological discomfort because of their conflicting identities and complex power relations.

In Chapter Three, I describe an empirical study in which eight males aged 16-18 from a YOI in England participated in semi-structured interviews facilitated using person-centred tools based on personal construct psychology. Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis was employed to analyse the data. CYP experienced both feelings of helplessness and hope in education within a YOI. Supportive relationships had the potential to foster hope, while their absence contributed to feelings of helplessness. It was inferred that, for these CYP, education was meaningful when relational support enabled them to feel hopeful and work towards their goals.

The findings of both research enquiries are discussed in relation to their implications, strengths, and limitations, with recommendations offered to guide future research and practice.

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Research Thesis: Declaration of Authorship

Print name: Alana Rose Gallacher

Title of thesis: 'Challenging' Educational Journeys: How do Children and Young People Experience Education in Prison and Secure Settings?

I declare that this thesis and the work presented in it are my own and has been generated by me as the result of my own original research.

I confirm that:

1. This work was done wholly or mainly while in candidature for a research degree at this University;
2. Where any part of this thesis has previously been submitted for a degree or any other qualification at this University or any other institution, this has been clearly stated;
3. Where I have consulted the published work of others, this is always clearly attributed;
4. Where I have quoted from the work of others, the source is always given. With the exception of such quotations, this thesis is entirely my own work;
5. I have acknowledged all main sources of help;
6. Where the thesis is based on work done by myself jointly with others, I have made clear exactly what was done by others and what I have contributed myself;
7. None of this work has been published before submission.

Signature: ..... Date: 01.06.2025

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Abbreviations

ACE ..... Adverse childhood experience

APA ..... American Psychological Association

CAMHS..... Community and Adolescent Mental Health Service

CASP..... Critical Appraisal Skills Programme

COREQ ..... Consolidated criteria for reporting qualitative research

CYP..... Children and young people

EP..... Educational Psychologist

ERIC..... Education Resources Information Centre

GET ..... Group experiential theme

HM ..... His Majesty's

HMPPS ..... His Majesty's Prison and Probation Service

IEP..... Incentives and earned privileges

IPA ..... Interpretative phenomenological analysis

JESPAR ..... Journal of Education for Children Placed at Risk

MoJ ..... Ministry of Justice

Ofsted ..... Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills

PCP..... Personal construct psychology

PET..... Personal experiential theme

PRISMA ..... Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta Analyses

SCH ..... Secure Children's Home

SLR ..... Systematic literature review

SPIDER ..... Sample, Phenomenon of Interest, Design, Evaluation, Research type

STC..... Secure Training Centre

TEP..... Trainee Educational Psychologist

TS ..... Thematic synthesis

UK ..... United Kingdom

Abbreviations

UNESCO ..... United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation

UNICEF ..... United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund

USA ..... United States of America

YCS ..... Youth Custody Service

YOI ..... Young Offender Institute

Chapter 1 Introduction

1.1 Aims and Rationale

Globally, an estimated 410,000 children and young people (CYP) are held in prison and secure settings (United Nations, 2019) with an average of 430 in custody at any given time in England and Wales (Youth Justice Board, 2025). These CYP often come from disadvantaged backgrounds, and their detention frequently contravenes international standards on children's rights (United Nations, 2019). Since the early 2000s, there has been growing recognition in the United Kingdom (UK) that this population is vulnerable and requires support rather than punishment (Bateman & Hazel, 2014). In 2016, two key reports in the UK emphasised the need to place education at the centre of custody for CYP, to support their reintegration and potential to flourish post-release (Coates, 2016; Taylor, 2016). In response, the government committed to opening a 'secure school', which opened in 2024 (Ministry of Justice, 2024) reflecting a wider shift towards a 'Child First' approach that centres care around the individual needs of CYP. While some global trends reflect a similar shift, many countries continue to prioritise punitive approaches (United Nations, 2019). Dominant discourses still emphasise risk-reduction (Case, 2021b; Case & Bateman, 2020) and there have been ongoing challenges implementing 'Child First' principles in practice (Case et al., 2024).

Educational Psychologists (EPs), with their training in learning, emotional wellbeing, systemic level thinking, and their experience of working with marginalised and vulnerable populations, are well-positioned to contribute to a more holistic and person-centred approach to support CYP who have offended (Hill, 2013). Their ability to work at the intersection of education, psychology, and social justice makes them well-suited to promote meaningful engagement and challenge deficit-based narratives. However, their role in these settings remains underutilised. Gumbs (2023) found that of the 76 Educational Psychology Services that responded to their research, 29% had a link EP working with the Youth Justice Service, though very few of these worked directly in custody. This thesis aims to understand CYPs lived educational experiences and explore what constitutes a

meaningful education for CYP in prison and secure settings, which may guide how professionals, including EPs, can support them.

CYP in custody are rarely given the opportunity to share their views, a gap that undermines children's rights frameworks (Lundy, 2007). Through this research, I sought to amplify the voice of this marginalised group by utilising a qualitative methodology. This population is particularly vulnerable due to the overrepresentation of CYP with learning needs. These include neurodivergence (Nkoana et al., 2020), low language and literacy levels (Rucklidge et al., 2013; Snowling et al., 2000), unmet learning needs (Nkoana et al., 2020), and disrupted educational histories (Little, 2015; Shafi, 2019). In recognition of these factors, I adopted child-friendly qualitative methods in my empirical project, namely semi-structured interviews using person-centred tools based on personal construct psychology (PCP), that allowed the CYP to express themselves in ways that were meaningful to them (Case et al., 2024). The same level of depth and responsiveness could not have been achieved through quantitative methods.

I undertook two complementary research enquiries to explore this topic: a systematic literature review using thematic synthesis (Chapter Two) and a qualitative empirical research study (Chapter Three). Both projects were centred on understanding the lived educational experiences of CYP in secure settings, with the aim of identifying what they consider to be meaningful in their education. The review (Chapter Two) involved synthesising existing international qualitative studies, while the empirical research used interviews to explore the views of eight CYP aged 16-18 within a Young Offender Institute (YOI). I believe that both chapters offer valuable insights that add to the current understanding of education in custodial settings.

1.2 Ontological and Epistemological Position

Throughout this research, I engaged in ongoing reflection on my own worldview and assumptions about the nature of reality (ontology; Grix, 2002), alongside the nature of knowledge and how it is acquired (epistemology; Blaikie, 2019). This reflective process helped ensure alignment

between my philosophical stance and research decisions, thereby supporting methodological coherence (Levitt et al., 2017), a key indicator of quality in qualitative research (Yardley, 2000).

I was guided by a relativist ontology, the belief that there are multiple realities rather than a single, objective truth. From this perspective, knowledge is seen as context-dependent and shaped by individuals' experiences, social positions, and cultural backgrounds (Burr & Dick, 2017). I adopted a qualitative methodology in both papers, drawing on different but compatible epistemological positions. I worked from a social constructionist stance in Chapter Two, while in Chapter Three, I adopted an interpretivist epistemology and employed Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). Despite similar research questions, I recognised that the world is multi-dimensional and complex. I was consciously aware of the subtle contextual differences between the two enquiries, in response, I adopted differing epistemological stances. This approach is known as 'epistemological pluralism', which enables a richer understanding of complex phenomena (Frost & Nolas, 2011).

The theoretical positions shaped the methodological choices in each chapter. In Chapter Two, guided by a social constructionist epistemology, I conducted a thematic synthesis (Thomas & Harden, 2008) to explore how CYP experience education in prison and secure settings. This included interpreting both the direct voices of children and young people and the comments and interpretations of adults, such as teachers or researchers, as reported by study authors. I understood these perspectives not as objective truths but as situated accounts shaped by broader cultural and institutional contexts. This approach aligns with the aims of thematic synthesis, which encourages researchers to move beyond the findings of original studies through their own interpretive engagement, enabling the development of new conceptual insights (Thomas & Harden, 2008).

Although thematic synthesis is typically associated with a realist orientation, it can also be applied from a relativist/social constructionist perspective, depending on the researcher's philosophical stance and engagement with the data (Barnett-Page & Thomas, 2009). To ensure congruence with my own ontological and epistemological assumptions, I drew on the work of Braun and Clarke (2022), who emphasise researcher subjectivity, contextual interpretation, and the active

role of the researcher in meaning-making. I chose this approach because thematic synthesis is methodologically influenced by thematic analysis, and I found it important to acknowledge my own beliefs and positionality when generating analytical themes. I believe these adaptations supported stronger alignment between the method and my relativist, social constructionist stance.

In Chapter Three, I adopted an interpretivist epistemology. This perspective assumes that reality is not objective or singular, but is instead understood through the unique, subjective experiences of individuals (Willig, 2021). My aim was to engage deeply with participants' lived experiences and to "enter their experiential world by stepping into their shoes and seeing the world through their eyes" (Willig, 2021, p. 18). Through this process, I sought to capture the texture and depth of participants' experiences.

Throughout this phase of the research, I grappled with methodological decisions due to a strong commitment to ensuring that the epistemological foundations of interpretivism genuinely guided my approach. Central to this was a desire to represent participants' lived experiences as faithfully and meaningfully as possible. This made the process of data analysis both lengthy and emotionally demanding. I often found myself second-guessing and overthinking each decision, driven by a sense of responsibility to do justice to the richness and nuance of the narratives shared with me.

As I progressed towards theme development, I became increasingly concerned about honouring each participant's individuality within the constraints of a word-limited academic paper. The task of distilling complex, personal experiences into group experiential themes was challenging. I approached decisions regarding theme names, paper titles, and phrasing with great care, always considering whether they genuinely reflected the lived experiences shared with me.

I understood that my epistemological position acknowledges the impossibility of accessing participants' lived worlds without an interpretative lens shaped by my own perspective (Smith et al., 2022). Data analysis was not a neutral task but a process of ongoing interpretative engagement. In moments of doubt or tension, I found grounding through reflexive journaling, supervision, and returning to the central phenomenological question: 'What is the world like for this participant?'

These practices enabled me to navigate the complexities of analysis while remaining attuned to the epistemological commitments at the heart of this research.

On reflection, both epistemological positions align closely with my developing approach as a Trainee Educational Psychologist (TEP). The interpretative phenomenological approach reflects the principles of person-centred counselling, where the practitioner engages with empathy and unconditional positive regard, accepting the individual's experience without questioning its validity (Willig, 2021). These principles underpin much of my professional practice, shaping the way I listen to and work alongside children, young people, parents, and teachers. This alignment has helped me make sense of the empathy I often feel in practice, as I strive to genuinely understand others' lived experiences.

Alongside this, I frequently adopt a social constructionist perspective, viewing the needs of CYP in the context of their social environments, rather than through a within-child lens. In this way, the epistemological pluralism that shaped this research reflects my practice, where I adopt different yet compatible epistemological stances depending on the context and nature of the work.

Looking ahead, I aim to continue developing both approaches in my future practice as an EP. I will remain mindful of the questions I ask, valuing the use of open-ended inquiry as a means of gaining deeper insight into the lived realities of those I work with. I also intend to maintain a critical awareness of the wider systems in which these subjective realities are experienced and shaped.

1.3 Axiology and Reflexivity

Axiology is the study of values (Hart, 1971). Reflecting on my own axiology ensured that I considered the role of my values, beliefs and biases. Highlighting my values helped me consider how they influenced the research process, from formulating research questions to disseminating results. By acknowledging these influences, I maintained integrity and transparency (Pretorius, 2024), which are essential components of high-quality qualitative research (Yardley, 2000). Although I adopted differing epistemological positions across the two chapters, my axiology remained consistent. I was

guided by values of empathy, respect, and a commitment to social justice. I acknowledged my active role in co-constructing knowledge and maintained a reflexive stance that prioritised the dignity and agency of the individuals whose experiences informed this research.

I have a long-standing interest in social justice. This interest is informed by my past professional experience working in a Children and Adolescents Mental Health Service (CAMHS) in a YOI. Sessions with CYP in the youth justice setting opened my eyes to the marginalisation some CYP face before, during and after their time in custody. This experience and interest not only led me to apply for the Educational Psychology Doctorate, but it also motivated me to pursue this thesis topic. My passion and interest inevitably influenced how I approached this research, taking an empathic and child-centred approach.

Furthermore, as a TEP and a qualified teacher, I value education and learning and believe education can perpetuate or help mitigate these challenges. Again, this interest and belief motivated me to focus on education in this project. My axiology and commitment are considered strengths in qualitative research (Yardley, 2000), but they also require careful reflexivity. Engaging in regular supervision and reflexive journals allowed me to ensure a balanced and ethically grounded research process. There were times when my supervisors gently challenged me. For example, once, I used emotive language in one of my drafts, and my supervisor pointed this out. This feedback prompted me to reflect on my own position in the research. After our conversation, I revisited my results section, keeping my own biases in mind, and adapted some of the language I had used.

My experience as a researcher navigating the YOI required reflexivity. Obtaining ethical approval was a lengthy and at times frustrating process, during which I often felt a lack of control while navigating both the University ethics system and the Ministry of Justice (MoJ) requirements. In one supervision session, while discussing the coding process for my systematic literature review, I noticed a recurring theme of authors expressing feelings of powerlessness, feelings that mirrored my own experiences. It was important to recognise this parallel and critically reflect on how it might influence my interpretations. I asked myself whether these emotional responses genuinely reflected

the participants' experiences or were shaped by my own frustrations with the research context. This reflexive questioning helped me remain grounded in the data and aware of my analytic lens.

Lastly, I spent a significant amount of time reflecting on my own power and privileges, utilising tools from my practice as a TEP to do this. Although I made efforts to address power imbalances during the design of my study, such as using person-centred tools and facilitating rapport-building sessions, I recognise that it is not possible to reduce all of them, and they likely influenced my research. For instance, during interviews, many CYP explicitly referenced my affiliation with the University of Southampton. In another interview, a participant asked me not to give him a "dead name". When I explored what he meant, he clarified that he didn't want to be given a "white person name". This moment prompted me to reflect on how my identity as a white British researcher may have been perceived by participants, particularly those from minoritised backgrounds. It highlighted the importance of cultural sensitivity. Furthermore, I became aware that the 'keys' I wore whilst in the YOI, which allowed me to enter and exit the institution, symbolised my liberty, a significant form of power. One CYP remarked, "They feel like they got power over us, because we're down here and they're up here because they got a set of keys". This comment highlighted the implicit power dynamics at play, which may have influenced the views that participants felt comfortable expressing, particularly regarding the institution, or education.

Reflexivity, for me, is not limited to the research process but an ongoing ethical commitment. As I continue to develop as an EP, I intend to carry forward this reflexive stance by using supervisory discussions and tools such as Social GRRRAAACCEEESSS (Burnham, 2012). This will support me to remain attuned to how my values, assumptions, power, privilege and emotions intersect with my professional practice.

1.4 Dissemination Plan

I have written both chapters to the specifications of an international, peer-reviewed journal, the 'Journal of Education for Students Placed at Risk' (JESPAR). This journal is appropriate for submission, as it is one of the few academic journals dedicated exclusively to improving educational

outcomes for students placed at risk of school failure due to disadvantage. The findings in Chapters One and Two, together with the core recommendations for making education in prison and secure settings more meaningful and responsive, align well with JESPAR's aim to support research that informs equity-driven, evidence-based practices.

In addition to submitting the chapters for publication in a peer-reviewed journal, I plan to disseminate the research to a range of relevant audiences. I have been accepted to present Chapter Two at the International School Psychology Association Conference, which aligns with the conference theme, "Promoting Sustainability Through More Humane Schools: The Role of School Psychology".

I also plan to disseminate Chapter Three through a presentation at the University of Southampton's postgraduate research conference and to EPs within the local authority where I am currently on placement. Although these audiences may not work directly with CYP in secure settings, the findings have broader relevance to professionals supporting those at risk of exclusion or educational disengagement, populations that often intersect with the youth justice system.

Finally, I will share the findings of Chapter Three with relevant staff members at the YOI where the research was conducted. If this is well received, I intend to explore opportunities for further dissemination within the wider Youth Custody Service to support practice development and inform future educational provision.

Chapter 2 How do Children and Young People Experience Education in Prison and Secure Settings? A Systematic Literature Review

2.1 Abstract

Every child has the right to a holistic education, including those in prison and secure settings. Existing research focuses on the impact that education in prison and secure settings has on reoffending rates, and there is a gap in the literature regarding children and young people's (CYP's) experience of education in these settings. This systematic literature review aimed to explore how CYP experience education in prison and secure settings. Qualitative findings from ten studies were synthesised using a thematic synthesis approach. Qualitative and mixed-method studies that included the experiences of CYP aged 18 and below were included. The researcher inferred that CYP felt hopeful that education could transform their lives despite the persistent systemic barriers they experienced. However, CYP experienced psychological discomfort due to conflicting 'learner' and 'offender' identities and the complex power dynamics they experienced in education. CYP responded to this psychological discomfort in various ways. Strengths, limitations and implications for education staff and Educational Psychologists are explored.

2.2 Introduction

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) affirms that every child, including those in prison and secure settings, has the right to an education. Education is the process of facilitating an environment where individuals can acquire and develop knowledge, skills, behaviours and values (UNESCO, 2011). Its purpose is to enhance knowledge, reduce inequalities, cultivate skills for independent learning, and promote overall wellbeing (Murray, 2023), ultimately enhancing outcomes for both individuals and society. The United Nations (1989) emphasises that achieving these goals requires a holistic education that supports the development of a child's personality, cognitive abilities, identity and values.

2.2.1 Vulnerable and Marginalised Populations in Education

Education serves as a tool to reduce inequality, encourage social mobility and connect communities (Oxfam, 2019), emphasising its importance for children and young people (CYP) who are vulnerable or from marginalised backgrounds. 'Vulnerable' individuals are those whose autonomy is diminished due to their societal status, psychological or physiological factors (Silva, 1995). The World Declaration on Education for All (1990) called for active efforts to eliminate educational disparities for CYP from low socio-economic backgrounds, minoritised ethnic and linguistic groups, migrants, refugees, and those with disabilities. UNESCO (1994) further emphasised that education systems should be inclusive, addressing the diverse needs of all learners, particularly those in the most vulnerable groups. The concept of intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1989) is essential in understanding how multiple forms of marginalisation intersect to create unique, compounded barriers to educational success. These overlapping identities must be considered when exploring the experiences of vulnerable CYP (Nadan & Korbin, 2018).

Despite the established right and need for education for vulnerable groups, educational practices often fail to reduce inequality and, in some cases, may even worsen it. The "school-to prison-pipeline" is a widely used metaphor to describe exclusionary practices in educational institutions that disproportionately push marginalised and vulnerable CYP, particularly those from minoritised ethnic and racial groups and lower socioeconomic status backgrounds, out of education and into the juvenile justice system. Research has indicated that this pipeline is more than just a metaphor and that there is substantial evidence for its existence (Skiba et al., 2014). These practices lead to disengagement from the mainstream education system (Little, 2015; Shafi, 2019), perpetuating cycles of disadvantage rather than alleviating inequality.

2.2.2 Children and Young People in Prison and Secure Settings

Globally, approximately 410,000 children are held in prisons and other secure institutions as a result of justice processes (United Nations, 2019). It is important to note that prison and secure settings vary widely in structure, purpose and approach across different countries; this will impact

the type and quality of education delivered. They are referred to by various names, such as young offenders' institutes, welfare houses, and detention centres (Robinson & D'Aloisio, 2009). For the purpose of this review, 'prison and secure settings' refers to facilities where CYP are detained as a result of justice processes.

CYP in these settings are often vulnerable and come from marginalised backgrounds. For example, they are disproportionately male (United Nations, 2019), from minoritised ethnic groups (Bateman et al., 2023; Hunter, 2019), care-experienced (Office for National Statistics, 2022), and neurodivergent (Nkoana et al., 2020). Additionally, they are more likely to come from low socioeconomic backgrounds (Farrington, 2020) and have experienced significant childhood trauma (Baglivio & Epps, 2016; Bergquist et al., 2024; Fox et al., 2015; Kowalski, 2019). CYP in prison and secure settings are also highly likely to be disadvantaged in terms of their education (Rogers et al., 2014) with lower language and literacy levels (Rucklidge et al., 2013; Snowling et al., 2000), unmet learning needs (Nkoana et al., 2020) and feelings of disengagement from education (Shafi, 2019). As a result, inclusive education that aims to reduce inequalities is of utmost importance in prisons and secure settings.

The concept of double vulnerability refers to the compounded impact of multiple factors that marginalise individuals or diminish their autonomy (Copp, 1986). In this context, CYP in prison and secure settings experience double vulnerability. Being labelled as 'offenders' deprives them not only of their liberty but also some of the qualities associated with childhood (Barry, 2007; Case & Bateman, 2020). For instance, children as young as six are deprived of liberty (Unicef, n.d.), even though this contrives the standards set by the Conventions of the Rights of the Child (2007). Similarly, CYP in these settings often face limited opportunities to express their views, which contravenes children's rights frameworks (Lundy, 2007).

The term 'offender' is a social construct (Case, 2021b), with countries defining offences and their consequences in varying ways (United Nations, 2019). Despite being a social construct, this label carries stigma, which can have long-term impacts on CYP and shape their intersecting identities

(Deakin et al., 2022; Quinn-Hogan, 2021). This novel identity experienced in prison and secure settings must be considered in the educational context.

2.2.3 Education in Prison and Secure Settings

CYP in prison and secure settings can achieve some of the core educational goals outlined by UNESCO (2011) and Murray (2023). Education in prison and secure settings can enhance knowledge in key subjects (Paterson-Young et al., 2022) which in turn can reduce inequalities. Additionally, education promotes positive wellbeing whilst in prison and secure settings through social and community cohesion (Segalo & Sihlobo, 2021).

There is a significant focus on education's role in rehabilitation, which is the primary objective of prison and secure settings worldwide (Penal Reform International, 2024). Rehabilitation in this context is often understood in terms of reducing recidivism (reoffending), but there is no single, universally agreed-upon definition of rehabilitation. Forsberg and Douglas (2022) identified five key concepts of rehabilitation: anti-recidivism, harm reduction (for the self and others), restoration of relationships with others in society, therapy, and moral improvement. Widely accepted models of rehabilitation accept the notion of the importance of education (Fortune, 2018; Ward & Fortune, 2013).

Although there is some overlap between the aims of education and rehabilitation, current rehabilitative efforts often focus predominantly on reducing risk (e.g., recidivism) rather than taking a more holistic approach that considers broader educational goals such as wellbeing, identity, values and independence (Case, 2021b; Case & Bateman, 2020). This focus on risk is reflected in much of the research, in which the success of education in prison and secure settings is often measured in terms of recidivism rates. For instance, studies have found that educational engagement can reduce recidivism in CYP in prison and secure settings (Blomberg et al., 2011; Rucklidge et al., 2013).

The focus on risk and recidivism may not give a holistic view of CYP's experience of education and whether it fulfils its broader purpose (Case & Hazel, 2020). Despite some evidence suggesting

positive impacts, a recent global study has concluded that prison and secure settings fail to adequately support CYP's educational and developmental needs (United Nations, 2019). In the UK, recent inspections raised concerns about the accessibility of education in these settings, highlighting issues such as safety concerns, insufficiently trained staff, and limited access to education (HM Inspectorate of Prisons, 2024). Similar challenges have been reported in the USA (Geib et al., 2011) and many other countries (Robinson & D'Aloisio, 2009), echoing the concerns of the global study (United Nations, 2019). Additionally, the limited impact of education on future outcomes (Cavendish, 2014) is likely attributed to the persistence of systemic barriers, such as poverty, trauma, and discrimination. These ongoing challenges and inequalities do not appear to be the focus of education when it is risk-focused.

A holistic model of education in prison and secure settings, 'child first', was introduced in England by Case and Hazel (2020). Emphasising positive youth justice, pro-social identity development, and the cultivation of educational attainment. This child-centred approach encourages education that is not only developmentally appropriate but also co-created with CYP, fostering positive relationships and identities. By aligning educational practices with children's rights and developmental needs, the system can support outcomes that extend beyond reducing reoffending, promoting overall wellbeing and success for CYP in these settings.

2.2.4 Towards a Qualitative Synthesis on the Educational Experiences of Children and Young People in Prison and Secure Settings

Whilst recidivism reduction is a valuable goal, it often overlooks other critical educational aims. A significant gap exists in the literature regarding the broader, more holistic educational experiences of CYP in prison and secure settings. CYP in these environments often come from vulnerable, marginalised backgrounds and face compounded challenges, both within the education system and due to the stigma associated with their 'offender' identity. Given these circumstances, it is crucial that education in these settings is not only of high quality but also addresses systemic barriers,

actively reduces inequalities, and empowers CYP to have a voice and sense of agency over their futures.

To address these gaps, research must adopt a holistic approach that considers the full spectrum of educational needs and goes beyond risk reduction. Qualitative methods, particularly thematic synthesis (Thomas & Harden, 2008), are well-suited to exploring the rich, diverse, and nuanced experiences of CYP in these settings. Qualitative and mixed methods papers were included to answer the research question: How do CYP experience education in prison and secure settings?

2.3 Methodology

2.3.1 Selection and Search Strategy

After conducting several initial scoping searches, a systematic search strategy was developed and implemented in accordance with the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta Analyses (PRISMA) framework (Page et al., 2021).

The final search, completed in August 2024, encompassed six electronic databases: APA PsychInfo, Web of Science, ERIC, Scopus, Sociological Abstracts, and ProQuest Dissertations and Theses Global. These databases were selected for their relevance to the fields of education, psychology, and/or criminology. To guide the development of the search terms, the SPIDER (Sample, Phenomenon of Interest, Design, Evaluation, Research Type) tool (Cooke et al., 2012) was utilised (Table 1).

Table 1

Identification of Search Terms using the SPIDER Framework

	Domain	Search terms
S	Sample	offend* OR "justice-involved" OR "justice involved" OR incarcerat* OR delinquen* OR prisoner* OR detain*

	Domain	Search terms
		young OR juvenile* OR youth OR child* OR adolesc* OR teen* OR boy* OR girl*
Pi	Phenomenon of interest	prison OR secure OR jail OR custod* OR correctional OR institut* OR detention* OR justice
		education OR school* OR learning OR classroom OR pedagog*
D	Design	questionnaire* OR survey* OR interview* OR "focus group*" OR "case stud*"
E	Evaluation	view* OR experienc* OR opinion* OR attitude* OR voice* OR perspective OR insight
R	Research type	qualitative OR ethnog* OR phenomenolog* OR "grounded theory" OR "content analy*" OR "action research" OR "mixed method*" OR "mixed-method*" OR "thematic analy*" OR "interpretative phenomenological analy*" OR "narrative analy*" OR narrative*

The identification and refinement of search terms followed an iterative process carried out in collaboration with the supervisory team. Searches were restricted to the title and abstract fields, with search terms and Boolean operators tailored to the specific requirements of each database. In addition to electronic database searchers, backward citation searching was employed to identify further relevant studies (Bethel & Rogers, 2018). The researcher independently conducted the screening process, consulting with the supervisory team when necessary to support decision-making. Articles identified during the searches were organised and managed using Rayyan (a web-based systematic review tool) and Zotero (a reference management software).

In total, the search yielded 1637 papers, of which 476 papers were removed due to duplication. After applying the inclusion and exclusion criteria (Table 2) during title and abstract

screening, an additional 1101 articles were excluded. Three articles were unavailable in full-text format, leaving 57 full texts for further eligibility assessment. Following the exclusion of 47 papers during full-text assessment and the inclusion of one additional article identified through citation searching, a total of 11 articles were selected for inclusion in the thematic synthesis (figure 1).

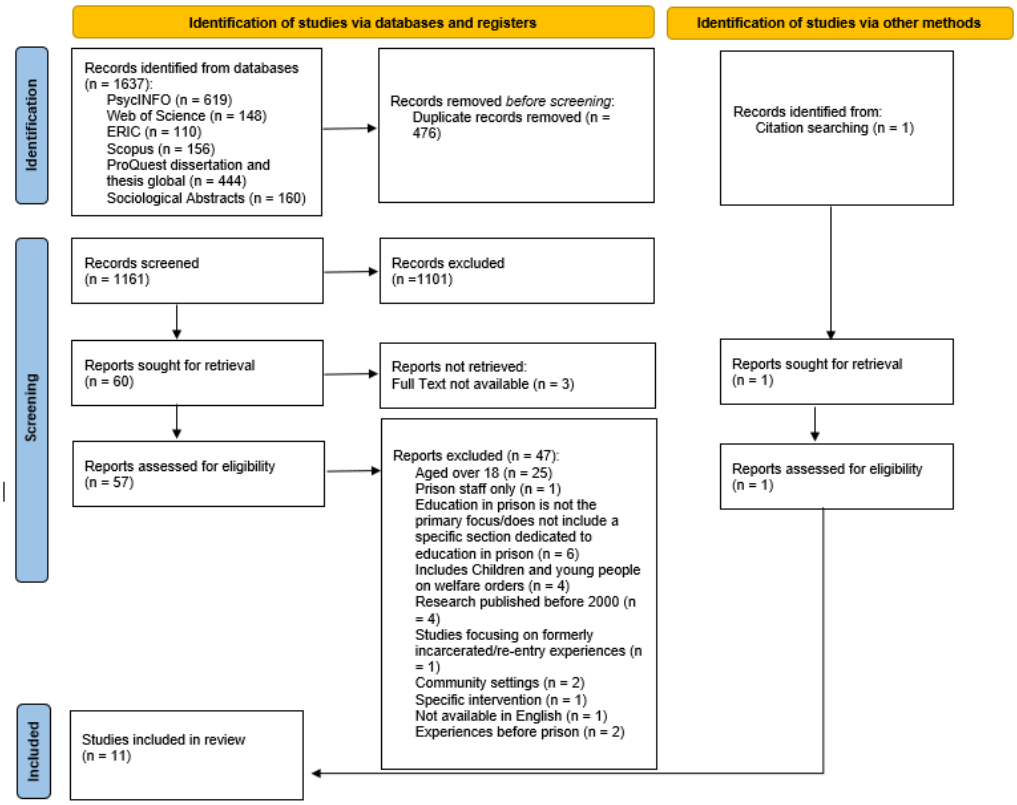
Table 2

Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

Inclusion Criteria	Exclusion Criteria
CYP aged 18 and under in prison/secure settings.	Adults in prison. Studies that focus only on the experiences of prison staff or parents, rather than the young people themselves. Studies involving children who are deprived of liberty under welfare orders for their protection and safety.
Studies that focus primarily on the educational experiences of children and young people in prison, or that include a specific section dedicated to education within broader discussions of their prison experiences.	Studies that focus on general education experiences across different stages of life outside of prison or that discuss general life experiences, rather than specifically focusing on education during incarceration.
Studies conducted at any point **during** the incarceration of children or young people.	Studies that focus on the experiences of formerly incarcerated individuals or re-entry into education after incarceration.
Qualitative research methods, including qualitative components from mixed-method approaches.	Quantitative research.
Available in English.	Reviews, reports, commentaries, discussion papers, books. Research published before 2000. Studies that focus on specific interventions rather than broader educational experiences.

Figure 1

PRISMA Flow Chart



2.3.2 Quality Appraisal

The Critical Appraisal Skills Programme (CASP; 2018) checklist for qualitative research was used to quality assess all 11 included articles (Table 3). This checklist was chosen for its simplicity (Majid & Vanstone, 2018). The checklist was modified to address its limitations, as Long et al. (2020) identified. As a result, an additional question concerning ontological, epistemological, and theoretical validity was incorporated, and more refined response options (“yes”, “no”, “sometimes”, “can’t tell”) were employed (Appendix A).

The primary aim of the quality appraisal process was to assess the methodological rigour rather than to exclude studies from the synthesis (Thomas & Harden, 2008). While some studies, despite their lower methodological quality, provided valuable insights, particular attention was paid to the interpretative quality of studies that received only “no” and “can’t tell” responses, with no

"yes" or "sometimes" responses. One such study by Isufi (2015), scored the lowest on the CASP tool and lacked a clear findings section, indicating very low interpretative quality. As a result, this study was excluded prior to coding. More generally, papers of lower quality were coded in the synthesis process after those of higher quality, meaning they had less influence on the creation of new codes. In practice, these lower-quality papers often reinforced ideas from higher-quality studies. However, when new ideas were identified from the lower-quality studies, they were still coded according to the established processes outlined below.

Table 3

Adapted CASP Checklist Summary

Adapted CASP criteria	**1**	**2**	**3**	**4**	**5**	**6**	**7**	**8**	**9**	**10**	**11**
Was there a clear statement of the aims of the research?	S	Y	S	Y	Y	Y	N	Y	Y	S	N
Is a qualitative methodology appropriate?	S	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	CT
Was the research design appropriate to address the aims of the research?	S	Y	S	Y	Y	Y	S	Y	S	S	CT
Are the study's theoretical underpinnings clear, consistent and conceptually coherent?	S	Y	CT	Y	CT	Y	CT	CT	CT	S	CT

Adapted CASP criteria	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11
Was the recruitment strategy appropriate to the aims of the research?	S	S	S	S	S	S	CT	S	S	Y	CT
Was the data collected in a way that addressed the research issue?	S	S	S	Y	Y	Y	S	Y	S	Y	CT
Has the relationship between the researcher and participants been adequately considered?	Y	Y	S	Y	N	Y	N	N	N	S	N
Have ethical issues been taken into consideration?	Y	Y	S	Y	Y	Y	N	S	S	S	N
Was the data analysis sufficiently rigorous?	Y	S	N	S	Y	Y	N	Y	Y	S	N
Is there a clear statement of findings?	Y	S	S	Y	S	Y	S	Y	S	Y	N
Is the research valuable?	Y	Y	Y	Y	S	Y	S	Y	Y	Y	N

Note. Y refers to yes, N to no, S to sometimes, CT to can't tell. 1 = (Alnajdawi, 2013), 2 = (Arendt, 2012), 3 = (Little, 2015), 4 = (Moore, 2000), 5 = (Nagamuthu et al., 2019), 6 = (Octigan, 2018), 7 =

(Ozdemir, 2010), 8 = (Phillips, 2011), 9 = (Reed & Wexler, 2014), 10= (Serie et al., 2023), 11 = (Isufi, 2015)

2.3.3 Data Extraction and Synthesis

The remaining 10 studies were analysed using the thematic synthesis (TS) approach outlined by Thomas and Harden (2008). Firstly, data regarding the characteristics of each study and its population was extracted to create a data extraction table (Appendix B). This data was not the focus of the synthesis but was required to obtain information about the included studies (Taylor et al., 2021). Next, the primary data for the thematic synthesis was extracted from the findings/results sections, including participant quotations and authors' interpretations.

Several studies employed mixed-method approaches, which complicated the data extraction process. In cases where quantitative and qualitative data were presented separately (e.g., distinct sections), the quantitative data was excluded from coding in NVivo 12; however, only qualitative data was coded when both types of data were presented in a single section. Furthermore, some studies included qualitative analyses of staff perspectives or CYP's views on life in a secure setting beyond the scope of education; these were not included in the coding for the synthesis either. However, the researcher's commentary on staff approaches, where included in the analysis of CYP perspectives, was included.

Following data extraction, the researcher followed the three-stage thematic synthesis approach (Thomas & Harden, 2008), initially setting the research question aside. In the first phase, a line-by-line coding approach was used, assigning at least one code to each sentence to reflect its meaning. A critical part of synthesising qualitative research is revisiting codes and refining them to facilitate the translation of concepts across studies. This iterative process led to the identification of 253 initial codes.

In stage two, 'descriptive themes' were developed by grouping similar codes and creating new codes to represent these categories. Twenty-four descriptive themes were identified. The final stage focused on the development of 'analytical themes'. During this stage, the researcher moved beyond

the initial data, reflecting on the research question and drawing inferences, particularly regarding CYP's education experiences within secure settings. Appendix C details the three-stage process used, with examples.

The TS approach is particularly suited for interpretative reviews (Boland et al., 2017) and aligns with the researcher's constructionist epistemological stance, where knowledge is viewed as constructed through individual experiences and interactions with the environment, as well as interpretations of these experiences (Alvesson, 2018). In this context, the researcher plays a pivotal role in going beyond the primary studies, drawing inferences, and interpreting how these findings are relevant to the research question (Thomas & Harden, 2008). Other synthesis methods, such as meta-ethnography and narrative synthesis were considered. However, TS was chosen because it combines systematic, transparent, line-by-line coding with a clear structure for developing themes that inform practice (Thomas & Harden, 2008). Meta-ethnography focuses more on generating new conceptual theories through reciprocal translation of studies and requires interpretative abstraction aimed at theory development (Barnett-Page & Thomas, 2009; France et al., 2019), whereas narrative synthesis is more descriptive and more suited to summarising findings than generating interpretative insights (Popay et al., 2006). Therefore, TS was selected as the most appropriate approach for this review.

Descriptive and analytical themes were discussed with the supervision team; these discussions aimed not to dispute the codes or themes but to consider reflexivity (Braun & Clarke, 2022). The TS approach is particularly effective for inductive reviews (Boland et al., 2017) enabling a focus on participants' lived experiences. A deductive approach would likely have offered limited value and could have led to circular reasoning rather than generating new insights. Although the approach was primarily inductive, some deductive coding inevitably occurred as the researcher constructed themes based on the data and the research question. A reflexive log was kept considering the position of the researcher in the analysis process (Appendix D).

2.4 Thematic Synthesis

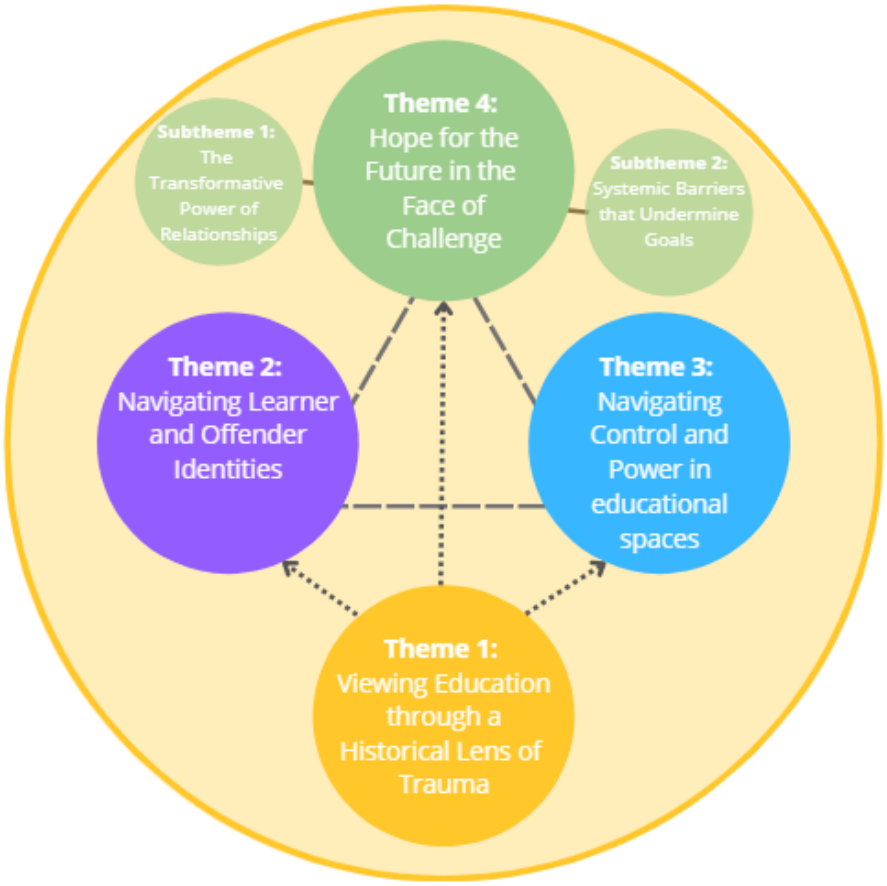
The 10 included studies, published between 2000 and 2017, explored diverse experiences of education among CYP aged 12 to 18 in secure settings. Most studies focused exclusively on male participants, reflecting the prevalence of male-only secure environments. While three studies included female participants, their representation was minimal.

The research spanned a variety of countries, including the USA, UK, Belgium, the Netherlands, Malaysia, Turkey, Jordan, and Canada. It also encompassed diverse settings, such as residential care institutions, young offender institutions, and specialised secure schools. This variation reflects the distinct justice systems and educational frameworks of each country.

In the analysis, 253 codes were identified across the studies. These were grouped into 24 descriptive themes, which were synthesised into four analytical themes and two subthemes (Appendix E). The analytical themes were designed to address the central research question: 'How do CYP experience education in secure settings?' and comprised 'viewing education through a historical lens of trauma', 'navigating learner and offender identities', 'navigating control and power in educational spaces', and 'hope for the future in the face of challenge' (Figure 2).

Figure 2

Thematic Map



2.4.1 Theme 1: Viewing Education through a Historical Lens of Trauma

CYP's experiences of education in secure settings cannot be understood in isolation; they are "informed more by echoes of their past experiences in public [mainstream] schools than they were by present reality" (Moore, 2000, p. 155). Mainstream school is a blueprint for CYP in secure educational settings (2, 4, 6, 8, 9). Participants viewed mainstream schools as the norm, referring to them as "real" (4), "proper" (6), or "regular" (9). This view is mirrored in the language researchers use, highlighting the deep-seated cultural belief that mainstream education is normal (2, 8).

Mainstream education, while seen as the norm, was often associated with negative experiences (1, 3, 6, 8, 9). For example, one participant noted "I've never liked school, I dunno why; schools just kinda pissed me off" (Phillips, 2011, p. 157). CYP specifically highlighted difficulties in relationships, with some reporting issues with power dynamics (1, 8) and others feeling unsupported

and uncared for by their teachers (6, 8, 9). One participant described this lack of support “See, our teachers, they just throw you the work, step off, don’t give us no help, no nothin” (Reed & Wexler, 2014, p. 202). These relational challenges extended to a systemic level, with many participants reporting experiences of exclusion and isolation (3, 6, 8). Negative experiences in mainstream settings shaped their current disengagement in secure educational settings (1, 3, 8, 9).

Personal trauma shaped CYP’s views on learning and relationships in two of the included studies (2, 8). For example, one participant described how an experience involving their mother shaped their aversion to certain learning activities:

> I really don't like learning how to cook, cause when I was really young… my mom was trying to teach me what hot was… she said touch that, and I put my hand on a hot burner. (Phillips, 2011, p. 152)

In both instances, trauma reinforced a deep mistrust for authority figures, creating barriers to meaningful participation in secure educational environments.

When comparing mainstream and secure settings, CYP expressed mixed views, sometimes perceiving mainstream education as superior and other times inferior (2, 4, 6, 9). However, their perception of secure education was consistently shaped by negative past experiences, both in school (1, 3, 6, 8, 9) and in their personal lives (2, 8). This theme serves as the contextual lens, shaping how education in prison and secure settings is experienced.

2.4.2 Theme 2: Navigating Learner and Offender Identities

The research reviewed reveals a clear tension between the dual identities CYP hold as offenders within a legal framework and as learners with the potential for growth. This tension is reflected in labels assigned to participants by researchers, such as "juvenile delinquents" (7, 5), "detained adolescents" (10), and “convicts” (9), these labels carry strong associations with crime, while terms like "young people" (6), "learners" (4), and "students" (8) aim to position them within

the educational context. The following section explores how children experience and navigate these conflicting identities.

Children, young people, and educators in secure settings hold distinct personal constructs of an 'ideal' learner (2, 4, 5, 8). For CYP, an ideal learner is someone who finds learning easy, demonstrates self-discipline (5), enjoys learning, pays attention in class, and does not have learning difficulties (8). One participant, for example, linked his success in a task to not having a learning disorder, stating, "I guess I'm not dyslexic like I thought" (Phillips, 2011, p. 158). However, many children in secure settings identify as having unique learning needs and difficulties (3, 4, 6, 8). This creates tension between their self-perception and their concept of an 'ideal' learner. Staff perceptions often exacerbate this tension, as some educators view ideal learners as passive and quiet (2, 4) and dismiss children's ambitious learning goals as unrealistic (2). These conflicting perceptions lead to a sense of dissonance for CYP, who feel they do not fit the mould of an 'ideal' learner (4, 6, 8), often attributing their difficulties with learning to internal traits or dispositions.

Adding to this complexity is the experience of being labelled and treated as offenders within an educational setting (1, 2, 3, 8). For instance, teachers and administrators in one study defined CYP as "delinquents first and persons second" (Moore, 2000, p. 144). The offender label permeates every aspect of their educational experience, from the clothing they are required to wear, such as red wristbands signalling the nature of their offence (4, 8), to the way they are grouped in classes, "separated into pods according to criminal charges" (Reed & Wexler, 2014, p. 204). Risk assessments (1, 3) and staff attitudes also shape their treatment, with some staff holding negative perceptions of students, even viewing them as "thugs" (Reed & Wexler, 2014, p. 168). This systemic reinforcement of the offender label is reflected in the research itself, where nearly half of the studies explicitly reference participant offences (2, 4, 7, 8, 9, 10). This constant reinforcement of their offender status further marginalises their identity as learners and creates dissonance.

The classroom environment often exacerbated the tension CYP feel between their learner and offender identities. Despite these CYP's complex needs, the educational approach frequently

emphasised independence, with a predominant reliance on learning packs or worksheets (3, 2, 4, 9). This approach treats them as though they are adult learners, overlooking their developmental, emotional, and educational needs. It also conveys the message that learning success is solely the CYPs responsibility, either they can do it, or they can't. This undermines the idea of learning as an interactive process between the learner, the teacher, and the task.

This dissonance between learner and offender identities leads to a range of psychological responses, including confusion and low self-esteem (4, 6, 8). CYP navigate this tension in different ways. Some internalise failure (4, 6), blaming themselves for their situation "I think to myself every night, this is my fault for getting myself in here" (Octigan, 2017, p. 88) or experiencing shame (6, 8). To cope, they often distanced themselves from reality by referring to the establishment as "here" or "where we are", rather than using its name (4, 6). There is also evidence of self-fulfilling prophecies, where participants jokingly or seriously enacted offender stereotypes. Examples include referring to crimes like kidnapping light-heartedly (8), raising their hands in mock surrender when confronted by teachers (4), or putting up a protective barrier (2, 8), asserting, "I'm a juvenile delinquent; you can't harm me" (Phillips, 2011, p. 126) The varied responses highlight the complex psychological impact of their dual identities.

2.4.3 Theme 3: Navigating Control and Power in Educational Spaces

Control and power shape the dynamics between teachers, students, and peers in any educational setting. The educational spaces in prison and secure settings had routines, schedules, rewards, sanctions, and hierarchies (1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 8, 9, 10). However, the way in which they are implemented and experienced differs significantly from mainstream educational environments. As one author noted, "Students have to be controlled by routines and surveillance but also by force when necessary" (Moore, 2000, p. 145).

Prison and secure settings impose physical boundaries (2, 4, 6), which impact CYP's educational experience: "We got these big cameras and the fence…It makes it hard to adapt to school. You always know those gates are out there" (Moore, 2000, p. 148). CYP perceived these

boundaries negatively, comparing them to a cage (2) or describing feelings of anxiety and entrapment (6). However, one study found these physical boundaries to be a source of comfort (6). This variation in responses likely reflects the differing past experiences that shape how CYP interpret education in prison and secure settings.

In addition to physical boundaries, the use of sanctions further reinforced the power dynamic within educational spaces (2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 8, 9). Sanctions included the loss of privileges, such as recreational time or personal items (6, 8). Educational activities were also withheld as punishment (2, 3, 4), including removing worksheets, isolation, and removal from the educational setting, implicitly suggesting to the CYP that they did not deserve to learn. Physical measures were sometimes employed, such as the use of batons and strip searches (2, 4). In some cases, CYP were threatened with consequences extending beyond the classroom, including delayed release from prison or negative implications for their future if they failed to comply with educational demands (4, 9). As one teacher remarked “Do your work because this is going to the judge” (Reed & Wexler, 2014, p. 201).

CYP also experienced reduced control through a lack of autonomy and choice regarding their participation in education and the subjects they studied (1, 3, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9). For some, enforced attendance had tangible benefits, such as improved learning outcomes (3, 6, 8, 9), enhanced social interactions (6), and greater engagement in independent study (9). However, others felt constrained by the limited educational programmes available, believing they would choose alternative or additional subjects if given more autonomy (3, 5, 6, 7). This lack of choice led to a noticeable decrease in intrinsic motivation, with CYP relying on extrinsic motivation (2, 3, 4, 6).

The hierarchy between teachers and CYP is pronounced, with teachers holding significant power in the sanctions they impose and how they communicate (2, 4, 5, 6). One CYP described this dynamic, saying, “You be talking like you own someone because you’re a teacher, You crazy, man” (Moore, 2000, p. 135). This power imbalance significantly impacted CYP’s relationships with their teachers, with many reporting feelings of being uncared for and unsupported (2, 4, 8, 9).

CYP navigate power dynamics in various ways (2, 3, 4, 6, 8). Some conform to rules (4, 8); for example, a young person responded to an enforced sanction by saying, “But it’s ku [cool], I’ll be a flower for now!” (Phillips, 2011, p. 131). Others assert the limited agency they have by challenging the rules (4, 6), insulting teachers (4), pointing out their mistakes, attempting to prove them wrong in front of peers (2), or ignoring instructions (8). Additionally, emotional defences, like saying, “You ain’t hurting me” (Arendt, 2012, p. 235) when their privileges were taken away or even physical threats (2), were sometimes used.

The hierarchy extended to student communities, where power varied based on factors such as physical appearance (2), institutional labels like ‘Gold’ (3), and length of time in the establishment (4). These dynamics fostered distrust and disengagement among peers, with CYP perceiving others as uncaring (4, 6, 8). Even researchers felt the weight of power dynamics (2, 4, 6), with one noting, “I, too, had become a prisoner” (Moore, 2000, p. 136).

2.4.4 Theme 4: Hope for the Future in the Face of Challenge

Despite the challenges of navigating, identity, control, and power, and past trauma in educational spaces, all 10 studies indicated that CYP in prison and secure settings perceive education as a source of hope for the future.

CYP view education as a means to gain social mobility (2, 4, 6), financial security (3, 4, 6), and freedom (4, 5, 9, 10). By engaging in education, they believe they can achieve long-term goals such as earning qualifications (1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10), accessing further education opportunities (1, 6, 8, 9) and securing employment in the future (1, 3, 4, 5, 6, 9, 10). As one participant noted, “Doing my GCSEs, it can change your life because you can get any job you want when you get them…it’ll look good for you as well because of the job interview” (Octigan, 2017, p. 97).

CYP had positive experiences of education in secure settings across all 10 studies. Participants felt that education generally met their needs in various ways. Specifically, education was interest-

based (2, 3, 6, 7, 8), tailored to their abilities through scaffolding (1, 6), and provided a higher teacher-to-student ratio (6, 9). As one participant explained:

> It will challenge you as well, so as not to make it extremely easy…they'll always put that pressure on you so constantly learning but they'll do it in relative comfort instead of a lot of stress…they build it up gradually so it helps. (Octigan, p. 58)

Many appreciated it giving them time (4, 5, 6) and a safe space (2, 6, 8) to learn. Education, within this context, also enabled CYP to develop key skills that would help them to work towards their hopes for the future. These skills included literacy (1, 9), emotional literacy (2, 8), social skills (6), and other new skills that could be used in employment (3, 5, 8). One participant shared:

> Yeah, I'm trying to really, like, get the GED [general education development] before I leave here, so I won't have to be worried about nothin' ... so I ain't got to go back to school. Start looking to colleges after that. (Reed & Wexler, 2014, p. 207)

The positive experiences in education supported children to develop a love of learning (1, 3, 6, 8), develop their confidence (2, 4, 5, 6, 8) and begin to identify themselves as a learner (4, 6, 8). As one participant reflected:

> Before this, I wasn't confident enough. But after I came here, I learn to believe myself…I think it just my own words have been haunting me that I can't do anything but in reality, I could achieve something. (Nagamathu et al., p. 114)

Subtheme 1: The Transformative Power of Relationships. Positive relationships can be potentially transformative despite prison and secure educational settings' complex and often fraught power dynamics. Relationships with teachers are particularly significant (1, 2, 4, 6, 8, 9), as they can make CYP feel cared for (6, 8), supported (4, 6, 9), pushed to grow as learners (8, 9), and valued as individuals (3, 4, 6, 9). One participant noted, "They know that we're having trouble, and they, you don't even have to ask them. They'll just come up and help you. And you just, you just start liking the teacher and you just ask her for help. It's like a good relationship though, you get to know them

more" (Phillips, 2011 p. 170). When CYP believe in their potential, it fosters a sense of self-worth and belonging (6, 8). For example, one author explained "favourite teachers were often described as best friends and nice. The youth reported learning the most from these teachers" (Phillips, 2011, p.161). These strong teacher-student relationships provide a safe base from which to explore relationships with others (6), engage in learning (1, 6), and ask for help (8).

While relationships with peers were also important (5, 6, 8, 9), they played a less transformative role. Peer relationships in secure educational settings were predominantly associated with supporting learning through collaboration and shared problem-solving (5, 6, 8, 9). As one participant noted:

> I'll obviously do group work cus I like to be, I like to be part of something, but either way if it's individual or group work anyway I'll still do it but I prefer to do group work cus obviously you get your heads together. (Octigan, 2017, p. 64)

One study described how some participants perceived peers as akin to family (6), but this view was not widely shared. Peer relationships were primarily viewed as supplementary to educational goals rather than deeply transformative.

Subtheme 2: Systemic Barriers that Undermine Goals. Despite the positive aspects of education, CYP frequently encounter systemic issues within the secure education system that hinder their ability to achieve their academic goals. A lack of access to relevant classes or being placed in ones that do not align with their goals was common. For some, there was a shortage of qualified staff to teach the variation of CYPs support needs effectively (3, 4, 5, 9), and others report a lack of differentiation in classes (2, 3, 4, 9). This issue is particularly felt by high-ability students (2, 3, 9), who often felt unchallenged by the material. For example, one participant shared, "You can't get no education about it ... They teach you the same thing every day. And half the people in there know it. Know everything they're talking about." (Moore, 2000, p. 149). Conversely, CYP with SENs do not feel as though work is appropriate for them (2, 4), for example "Well, they don't give me classes because

I don’t speak English ... I do come and listen to what they are saying, but I don’t understand what is going on.” (Reed & Wexler, 2014, p. 201).

In secure settings, the need for safety often takes precedence over educational objectives for the establishment (1, 3, 4, 5, 6). This prioritisation can restrict the type of educational opportunities available for CYP. Additionally, safety concerns disrupt children and young people’s focus (2, 3, 5, 6), as one participant shared "I don't feel settled here so I'm not even thinking about education" (Little, 2015, p. 37).

Once released, CYP people face significant systemic barriers that hinder their ability to pursue their long-term goals. They struggle with difficult home environments (8), poverty (1, 2), lack of stable accommodation (3), and feelings of disconnect from their families because of incarceration (1, 5, 6, 8). One young person reflected on the future they anticipated post-release “I will not continue my education as I do now [here at the institution]...I will return to beg” (Alnajadawi, 2013, p. 205). This statement highlights the impact of poverty: the need to survive outweighs the importance of thriving and growing. In some cases, gang involvement (8) and mental health issues also present challenges (3). These barriers may make it difficult for them to transition successfully into post-release life and achieve their goals.

2.5 Discussion

This paper sought to explore how CYP experience education in prison and secure settings. The findings from 10 studies were analysed using TS (Thomas & Harden, 2008). Overall, CYP viewed education as a powerful tool for personal transformation. In line with its defined purpose (Murray, 2023; Oxfam, 2019), CYP believed it could enhance knowledge, reduce inequality, cultivate skills for independence, and promote their overall wellbeing. CYP also recognised that education in prison and secure settings supports them to achieve their goals, helping to develop their cognitive skills, identity, values and personality, as outlined by the Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989). Despite significant barriers, hope persisted among CYP, which aligns with Hope Theory (Snyder, 2000), suggesting that individuals with hope are more likely to persevere through challenges.

Relationships with teachers were significant in facilitating personal transformation. CYP particularly valued the sense of being cared for; this finding aligns with previous research conducted with CYP in youth justice settings (Fullerton et al., 2021).

Although education in prison and secure settings is perceived as a source of hope for CYP, various systemic challenges before, during their time in these settings, as well as in the future, hinder their ability to achieve the desired outcomes. Consistent with the "school-to-prison pipeline" (Skiba et al., 2014), CYP have a history of negative educational and personal experiences, which influences how they engage with, and experience, education in these settings (Shafi, 2020). Additionally, CYP in prison and secure settings are often vulnerable and marginalised (Baglivio & Epps, 2016; Bateman et al., 2023; Rogers et al., 2014), these intersectional identities (Crenshaw, 1989) and systemic barriers are not always addressed by the educational programmes available, limiting the potential for transformative change during their time in prison and secure settings.

The education that CYP experience in prison and secure settings often focuses on managing risk rather than addressing their holistic needs. Recent research has critiqued this approach (Case, 2021a; Case & Bateman, 2020; Case & Hazel, 2020), which prioritises risk over the child's full emotional, psychological and developmental needs. As a result, CYP in these environments experience significant power and control being exerted over them, which leads to psychological discomfort. Reacting to this discomfort and perceived threat to their freedom, CYP often assert their limited agency, which further perpetuates their negative educational experiences. This response can be explained by reactance theory (Rosenberg & Siegel, 2018), which suggests that individuals will resist when they feel their freedom is being restricted, often driven by the unpleasant emotional response of perceived loss of control.

CYP also experience psychological discomfort when navigating the conflicting identities of 'offender' and learner. According to social identity theory, individuals understand themselves through their social reality (Tajfel, 1981) and in this context, CYP are socially assigned the identity of an 'offender'. Both CYP and those around them (e.g., staff) are more likely to attribute their past

behaviour to internal dispositional factors (e.g., personality or morality) rather than situational factors (Shaver, 1975). CYP internalise this identity, particularly as it is reinforced by the way others treat them (Tajfel & Fraser, 1990). This reinforced 'offender' identity conflicts with how CYP conceptualise themselves as 'learners' and holding both identities leads to cognitive dissonance. Cognitive dissonance is the psychological discomfort that occurs when an individual holds two or more contradictory beliefs, values or attitudes, leading to an urge to resolve the inconsistency (Festinger, 1962). The societal expectations associated with being an "offender" (Hough & Roberts, 2023) clash with the aspirational identity of a learner that many CYP value. This dissonance often leads to multiple responses, such as distancing themselves from their "offender" identity, internalising low self-esteem, or minimising their offences, which aligns with the research (Toyoki & Brown, 2014). Furthermore, the label of "offender" often results in CYP being treated in a more adult-like manner within education, with expectations for them to work independently and manage their learning. This aligns with the idea that the offender label can overshadow their child status, leading to them being treated less as children and more as adults (Barry, 2007; Case & Bateman, 2020).

2.5.1 Implications

Based on the findings, there are several key implications. While this study focused on the educational provision within prison and secure settings, it is important to recognise that these environments do not exist in isolation. The results indicate that CYP often have a history of negative educational and personal experiences, which may have contributed to their involvement in the justice system (Skiba et al., 2014). This highlights the urgent need for early intervention and diversionary practices that support CYP before they become involved in crime (United Nations, 2019) rather than reinforcing their vulnerability and marginalisation. Addressing these issues earlier could prevent the cycle of disadvantage that often leads to criminalisation.

Additionally, CYP face ongoing challenges that act as significant barriers to their goals. These findings highlight the need for a whole-system approach that considers CYP's challenges both pre-

and post-custody (United Nations, 2019). Bronfenbrenner's (1977) Ecological Systems Theory reinforces this need by highlighting that CYP's development and experiences are shaped by the interactions across multiple layers of their environment, from family and education to community and broader societal structures. Such an approach is particularly crucial for marginalised and vulnerable CYP (Public Health England, 2020), as it allows for tailored support that addresses their unique needs across all areas of life, inside and outside prison and secure settings.

Educators in secure and prison settings should actively nurture and sustain the sense of hope CYP hold about education, integrating this into the pedagogy and messages they communicate. This approach aligns with the broaden-and-build theory (Fredrickson, 2004), which suggests that fostering positive emotions such as hope can lead to greater psychological resilience and long-term success.

One key source of hope identified in the findings was the transformative power of relationships, particularly those with teachers. These relationships can promote hope by supporting CYP to reconstruct their self-narratives (Youngs et al., 2021). To facilitate this, it is important for staff to engage in reflective practice and use frameworks such as social GGRRAAACCEEESSS (Burnham, 2012), enabling them to critically examine how the 'offender' label may shape their perceptions and expectations of CYP. By identifying and challenging these underlying assumptions, staff can begin to adopt and communicate a more hopeful narrative about CYP. In doing so, they can also draw on principles of narrative therapy (White & Epston, 1990) supporting CYP to explore alternative meanings (e.g., reinterpreting their understanding of their educational histories) and externalise their behaviours, supporting them to understand that they themselves are not the problem. Over time, this can support CYP in internalising a more positive and aspirational sense of self.

Building on the role relationships play in fostering hope, educators should adopt a relational approach to supporting CYP in education in prison and secure settings, helping them feel cared for and valued. A recent research synthesis (Fullerton et al., 2021) found that CYP in youth justice settings highly value relationships with adults who are friendly, fair, empathetic, trustworthy, genuine, dependable, respectful, persistent, and with a sense of humour. These qualities foster trust,

enabling a transformative impact on CYP's lives and educational experiences. This relational approach has already been adopted in some UK community justice settings (HM Inspectorate of Probation, 2023). Further exploration is needed on effectively adapting and implementing relational approaches within education in prison and secure settings. Educational Psychologists are well-positioned to support the implementation of relational practices in these settings.

Lastly, it is critical to take a holistic approach to supporting CYP in education in prison and secure settings to ensure that CYPs are viewed as children with developmental and educational needs that differ significantly from those of adults. The "Child First" model for education in prison and secure settings (Case & Hazel, 2020) aligns with this, emphasising the importance of seeing the child's needs, growth and identity as central to their educational experience. This model allows them to focus on their potential as children first, reducing the tension between their offender and learner identities. Furthermore, such an approach acknowledges the unique challenges CYP face but also encourages a more collaborative, less hierarchical relationship between CYP and educators. This shift in power dynamics can help reduce feelings of psychological discomfort and reactance, as the more participatory approach allows CYP to feel less controlled and more empowered in their educational journey. By viewing CYP through the lens of their rights and developmental needs, educators can foster trust, reduce resistance, and support more positive engagement with learning. Educational Psychologists have the skills and knowledge to support the implementation of such models in youth justice settings (Hill, 2013; Howarth-Lees & Woods, 2022). In the UK, some Educational Psychologists are already engaging in this kind of systemic level work (Gumbs, 2023) helping to ensure that educational practices align with the developmental needs of CYP in youth justice settings.

2.5.2 Strengths and Limitations of Included Studies

The included studies span diverse cultures, contexts and age groups, which allows for nuanced interpretations of the educational experiences of CYP in prison and secure settings. However, several significant methodological concerns arise from the studies. One notable issue is the insufficient consideration of power dynamics. Many studies fail to address the relationship between the

researcher and participants, particularly regarding how power is exercised in the recruitment process. For example, in two studies, very senior members of staff (e.g., 'superintendent of the prison') recruited participants. This is especially critical when working with doubly vulnerable participants, such as CYP, in prison and secure settings, where power imbalances may exacerbate vulnerabilities (Shafi, 2020).

2.5.3 Strengths and Limitations of the Review Process

There is ongoing debate in the literature about the most effective methods for conducting systematic literature reviews (Saini & Shlonsky, 2012). Some researchers advocate for a purposive sampling approach, arguing that it aligns better with the iterative nature of qualitative research (Dixon-Woods et al., 2006), while others emphasise the value of a systematic search strategy in enhancing the quality of literature reviews (Booth, 2006; Varsha et al., 2024). Given the limited availability of relevant studies, a purely purposive approach was not feasible. Instead, a comprehensive search strategy was employed. Elements of purposive sampling were still incorporated, such as including studies that focused on the broader experiences of individuals in prison and secure settings, not limited to education alone. Although these studies contained only small sections relevant to the topic, they offered valuable, nuanced insights that contributed depth to the findings. Therefore, the systematic search strategy is considered a strength. Additionally, the inclusion of grey literature further strengthened the review, by capturing evidence from a broader range of sources, thus enriching the findings and mitigating publication bias (Mahood et al., 2014).

A potential limitation is the inclusion of 18-year-olds, who are considered as adults in many legal systems. While this age boundary varies internationally (United Nations, 2019), age should be understood in terms of context and lived experience, not just chronological age. In this light, their inclusion was considered reasonable. Given the limited research focused exclusively on under-18s in these settings, the inclusion of studies with 18-year-olds who were residing in youth facilities allowed for a more comprehensive understanding of the experiences in prison and secure settings. This was

particularly important in ensuring that the findings remained relevant and reflective of the broader context in which these young people are situated.

Finally, when conducting TS, the researcher engages in third-level abstraction, which involves interpreting other authors' interpretations of participants' interpretations. This process inevitably means that the researcher's attitudes, beliefs, and perspectives influence the development of final themes. This aligns with the author's ontological and epistemological stance and understanding of the importance of reflexivity (Braun & Clarke, 2021). However, given the diverse contexts and cultures represented in the studies, it would have been beneficial to have worked in an intercultural team to further reflect on potential biases (Duden, 2021).

2.5.4 Conclusion

Data from the included studies suggest that CYP perceive education to be a powerful tool for personal transformation. Despite significant barriers they face prior to and during their time in prison and in secure settings, as well as in the future, hope remains a persistent and crucial foundation that can be built upon. However, CYP often experience psychological discomfort due to the power dynamics they encounter and the conflicting identities of "offender" and "learner." Further research into practices such as the "child first, offender second" framework and relational approaches to education in prison and secure settings is essential to explore whether these can mitigate the challenges CYP face. Considering these findings within the context of the limitations outlined in the review is important. Future research into the educational experiences of CYP in prison and secure settings must ensure methodological rigour and uphold ethical considerations. The findings from this study may be particularly relevant for Educational Psychologists and educators in prison and secure settings.

Chapter 3 “I try to make the most of it, but I don’t always think I am able to”: Children and Young People’s Experiences of Education in a Young Offender Institute

3.1 Abstract

The aim of a Young Offender Institute (YOI) is to support children and young people (CYP) to flourish and lead meaningful lives upon release. Education is positioned as a key mechanism for achieving this aim. While research primarily focuses on reducing reoffending or the school-to-prison pipeline, little is known about CYP’s lived education experiences in YOIs, limiting understanding of what makes education meaningful in these settings. This study aimed to explore these experiences through qualitative methods. Eight 16-18-year-olds from a YOI in England were interviewed about their educational experiences, future goals, and how they felt education could be adapted to facilitate more meaningful learning. Interview data was analysed using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis. CYP in this study experienced a complex emotional dynamic, marked by feelings of both helplessness and hope. Education was perceived as meaningful when supportive relationships fostered hope and offered alternative pathways for the future. The implications, strengths, and limitations of this research are discussed, with suggestions provided to guide future research and practice.

3.2 Introduction

According to the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989), every child, including those in Young Offender Institutes (YOIs), has the right to access education. Education plays a pivotal role in shaping the lives of children and young people (CYP), equipping them with knowledge, skills, behaviours and values (UNESCO, 2011). Beyond knowledge acquisition, education should also promote social mobility, reduce inequalities, and enhance wellbeing (Murray, 2023; Oxfam, 2019).

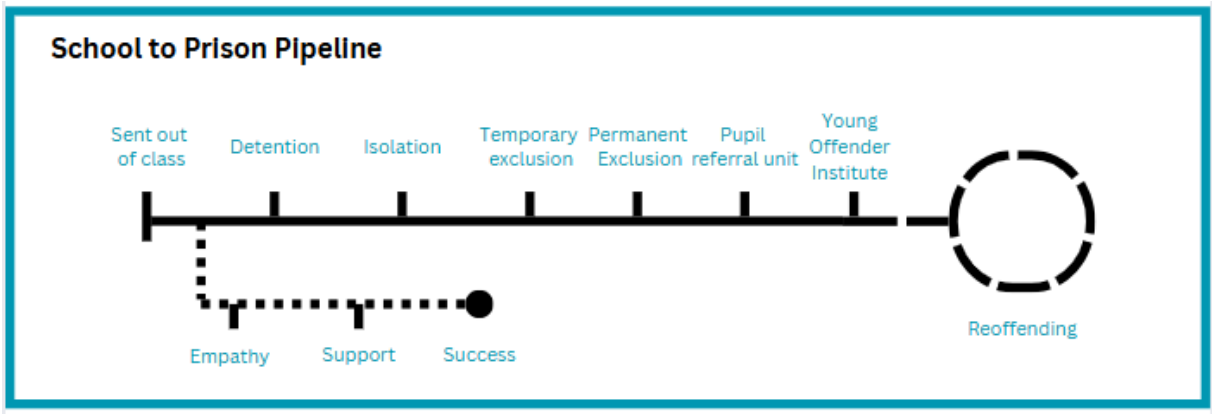
3.2.1 Vulnerable and Marginalised Populations in Education

Education's potential to reduce inequality and promote social mobility is particularly significant for CYP from vulnerable or marginalised backgrounds. 'Vulnerability', in this context, refers to diminished autonomy or reduced capacity to protect oneself due to factors such as societal status, age, disability, or adverse physical, psychological, or environmental conditions (Silva, 1995). Some CYP hold multiple identities that intersect to cause further marginalisation (Crenshaw, 1989). These intersecting identities, such as being neurodivergent and from a low socio-economic background, create unique and compounded forms of disadvantage, which can be more challenging to address than singular forms of marginalisation.

Education should eliminate educational disparities for vulnerable and marginalised CYP (UNESCO, 1990) through inclusive systems that address the needs of all learners (UNESCO, 1994). However, for many CYP from vulnerable and marginalised backgrounds, education can exacerbate existing inequalities, as they are disproportionately affected by exclusionary practices (Timpson, 2019). These practices have a significant impact on CYP's long-term outcomes, increasing their risk of following the 'school-to-prison' pipeline (Timpson, 2019). The school-to-prison pipeline (Figure 3) is a metaphor that illustrates how CYP who are excluded from mainstream education are at increased risk of entering the Youth Custody Service (YCS; Little, 2015; Shafi, 2019; Skiba et al., 2014).

Figure 3

Adapted 'School to Prison Pipeline'



Note. A reproduced image of the school-to-prison pipeline. From Powerful 'school to prison' tube map highlights impact of exclusion on pupils, by G. Chambers, 2018 (https://www.standard.co.uk/news/london/london-students-highlight-school-to-prison-line-on-gcse-results-day-a3918846.html)

3.2.2 CYP in the YCS

The YCS comprises YOIs, secure children's homes (SCHs), secure training centres (STCs) and, more recently, a secure school (Youth Custody Service, n.d.). Although the overall number of CYP in custody has significantly declined over the past two decades, on average, there are still 430 CYP under the age of 18 in custody in England and Wales at any given time (Youth Justice Board, 2025). This group represent the most complex, vulnerable, and socially marginalised individuals within the Youth Justice Service.

CYP in the YCS are disproportionately from disadvantaged and minoritised communities, reflecting the broader systemic inequalities present in society. Notably, 98% of the YCS population is male, and minoritised ethnic groups are significantly overrepresented (His Majesty's Prison and Probation Service & YCS, 2025). Socioeconomic adversity is another key factor: 68.5% of those in the YCS were eligible for free school meals, and 60% have experienced involvement with social care, either as 'children in need' or 'children in care' (Office for National Statistics, 2022).

Approximately one-third of CYP in the YCS have a mental health difficulty (Chitsabesan et al., 2018). Furthermore, CYP in the UK who have been involved in violent offences are significantly more likely to have experienced a disproportionately higher number of adverse childhood experiences (ACEs; Gray et al., 2021). ACEs include physical, sexual or psychological abuse, as well as exposure to substance misuse, criminal behaviour and domestic violence in the home environment (Felitti et al., 2014). However, this list is not exhaustive; rather, it is helpful to conceptualise ACEs as chronic, harmful, and distressing experiences that a CYP may endure (Kalmakis & Chandler, 2014).

Finally, many CYP in the YCS have had challenging educational journeys. Over 75% of CYP in the YCS have identified special educational needs (SEN), significant gaps in their learning and attainment, and 65% have experienced school exclusion (Office for National Statistics, 2022). These factors are strongly associated with disengagement from formal education and long-term disadvantage (Shafi, 2019). Although the 'school to prison pipeline' is well established and evidence-based (Skiba et al., 2014), entering a YOI is often perceived as the 'end of the line' for their educational journey. This study aims to consider the educational experiences of CYP once they have entered the YCS.

3.2.3 CYP in YOIs

Among the different YCS settings, YOIs present the most challenging environment. Designed for 15-to-18-year-old boys who are either sentenced or on remand for an offence, YOIs operate under regimes that closely resemble adult prisons (Committee of Public Accounts, 2022). The format and experience of the institutional context itself may well be seen to undermine the rehabilitative and developmental needs of CYP, further marginalising those who reside there.

Furthermore, the very names given to such settings impose an institutional label ('offender'), reinforcing stigma and affecting how others treat them. Labelling theory suggests that individuals assigned such labels, will be treated differently by others. Over time, they internalise these labels, impacting their self-efficacy, behaviour (Becker, 1963) and sense of hope (Lopez et al., 2000). Research in the YCS indicates that labels deepen CYP's experiences of marginalisation and disempowerment (Day, 2022). 'Offender' becomes yet another intersecting identity that makes them 'doubly vulnerable' (Copp, 1986).

3.2.4 The Potential of Education in a YOI

The aim of the YCS is to ensure that CYP are equipped to lead fulfilling lives upon release (House of Commons Education Committee, 2022; Taylor, 2016). Education is positioned as a key mechanism for supporting this aim (Coates, 2016), to the extent that the government has begun shifting away from traditional YOIs towards the development of 'secure schools' (Taylor, 2016). This

focus contrasts with the broader goals of the adult prison estate, which prioritises protecting the public from harm and promoting rehabilitation (Ministry of Justice, 2021). Education in YOIs can support CYP to develop skills, obtain qualifications and gain employment. Coates (2016) suggested that education in a prison setting, such as a YOI, needs to be holistic - supporting the development of basic skills (maths, English), vocational training, personal and social development, arts, music and sport.

Beyond practical skills and qualifications, education should equally support CYP in YOIs to develop positive mental wellbeing (Coates, 2016; Taylor, 2016). Flourishing is characterised by good mental and physical health, social functioning, and a sense of meaning in life. According to Seligman (2011), flourishing requires the fulfilment of five core elements of wellbeing: positive emotion, engagement, relationships, meaning and achievement (PERMA). This is known as the PERMA framework. These can be nurtured through strength-based approaches that focus on individuals' capabilities rather than deficits. Education, particularly when holistic and inclusive, can foster flourishing by enhancing CYP's emotional, social and cognitive development. This relationship is reciprocal: while education can support CYP to flourish, flourishing in turn can enhance CYP's engagement with education (Ruyter et al., 2022).

According to Hope Theory (Snyder, 2000), hope arises from setting goals, identifying pathways to achieve them, and maintaining a sense of agency. These elements are particularly relevant within YOIs where education can play a key role in fostering hope. However as outlined by Snyder (2000), encountering barriers, feeling unable to see ways forwards towards future goals, and a lack of personal control (linked with 'pathway-' and 'agency-thinking') can lead to experiences of hopelessness. Considering the highly restrictive nature of such environments, CYP in YOIs may well feel disconnected from their futures, experience repeated setbacks and unexpected challenges, and lack meaningful agency over their current situation, all of which is likely to impact on their capacity to feel hopeful. However, educational settings, when nurturing, inclusive and relational, can act as powerful vehicles for restoring hope. Staff and peer culture play an instrumental role in this process (McDermott & Hastings, 2000). Research suggests that high-hope environments empower individuals

to set personally meaningful goals and support the development of the cognitive and emotional skills needed to pursue them (Snyder & Feldman, 2000).

In recent years, the YCS has adopted the “Child First” approach (Youth Justice Board, 2022), which follows four main principles: being child-friendly, promoting pro-social outcomes, collaborating with CYP and avoiding stigma (Case & Browning, 2021). These principles also apply to education within YCS settings. Case and Hazel (2020) argue that education must adopt a child-centred, strengths-based approach that prioritises relational connection and the development of a positive, pro-social identity, key factors in fostering sustained educational engagement. This child-centred approach has the potential to not only improve academic outcomes but also promote long-term wellbeing.

3.2.5 Education in a YOI

Despite the transformative potential of education for CYP in YOIs, recent inspection evidence (Ofsted & HMPPS, 2024) paints a concerning picture of provision on the ground. Far from supporting flourishing or fostering hope, YOIs struggle to deliver a basic standard of education, let alone one responsive to their learners' complex needs and aspirations.

The report (Ofsted & HMPPS, 2024) highlighted how chronic staff shortages, under-resourced infrastructure and poor communication between YOI leaders and education providers have led to lessons being frequently cancelled. On average, CYP in YOI settings receive only 10 hours of education per week, substantially less than their peers in mainstream settings. In some cases, these CYP have experienced as little as 30 minutes out of their cells each day. Even when they do attend education, nearly 75% are moved from a course before they sit their final exams.

The same report also highlighted how curriculum provision has deteriorated over the last decade: the range of vocational courses has narrowed significantly, links with employers have weakened, and access to higher-level qualifications remains limited. Educational activities are often task-driven rather than focused on meaningful learning and skill development. Furthermore, CYP in

custody are more likely to have Education, Health and Care Plans (EHCPs; Office for National Statistics, 2022); however, they are often out of date when they arrive in custody (Howard League for Penal Reform & Independent Provider of Special Education Advice, 2022), reflecting previous disruptions in their education. Although EHCP assessments can, in theory, be initiated and reviewed during custody in preparation for release, this rarely happens in practice (Howard League for Penal Reform & Independent Provider of Special Education Advice, 2022). These systemic issues leave CYP unprepared for life after custody, significantly limiting their opportunities to lead rewarding lives. In such a fragmented and under-resourced system, it becomes difficult to cultivate the hope, agency and sense of meaning that underpin educational engagement and flourishing.

The psychological potential of education also remains largely unrealised. Research has also shown that while the 'Child First' approach is now embedded within YCS policy, its implementation across settings remains inconsistent (Case et al., 2024). CYP frequently report feeling unheard and overlooked in decisions that directly affect them, including their education. CYP express a desire for education grounded in their goals and aspirations: learning that reflects who they are and who they hope to become (Case et al., 2024). The disconnect between the rhetoric of participation and the reality of provision risks reinforcing disengagement, particularly when young people feel they have little agency or ownership over their learning journey.

Lastly, the growing presence of individuals over 18 further complicates the educational landscape within YOIs (Youth Justice Board, 2025). While education is only compulsory up to age 18 in the community (Department for Education, n.d.), CYP in YOIs are still required to participate in educational activities. The result is a complex, developmentally diverse environment in which education providers must cater to varying levels of need, legal status, and motivation, often without the flexibility required to do so effectively. This presents a double-edged challenge, placing considerable demands on both learners and educators within an already complex system.

3.2.6 CYP's Lived Experience of Education in YOIs in the UK

As part of their inspection, Ofsted and HMPPS (2024) asked CYP in YOIs to complete a survey. The findings revealed many CYP felt uncared for, disrespected, and emotionally unsupported. Trust in adults was limited, with few staff members perceived as reliable or approachable. These relational fractures contribute to frustration, demotivation, and emotional withdrawal, conditions fundamentally at odds with educational engagement and wellbeing.

Empirical evidence exploring CYP educational experiences in YCS settings reinforces these concerns but also highlights the enduring potential of education, even in restrictive environments. Shafi (2019) and Octigan (2018) both conducted research in SCHs. Both found that while CYP felt they lacked autonomy and often perceived education to be of low quality, they still recognised its value for gaining qualifications and future employment. Importantly, Shafi's (2019) research showed that disengagement was not fixed; CYP moved between active and passive forms of disengagement depending on the relational and emotional climate, suggesting that engagement is possible when the right conditions are in place.

Similarly, Little (2015) conducted research in a YOI and found that CYP valued education and understood its importance for their futures. Yet, they faced significant structural and emotional barriers, including a lack of choice and institutional constraints. Lastly, Day (2022) focused on neurodivergent CYP in the YCS and their previous educational experiences, highlighting the compounding effects of unmet needs, labelling, and isolation. However, this research also found that when CYP's needs were recognised and met, they demonstrated a strong desire to learn and engage.

Despite their valuable insights, existing studies remain limited in number and scope. CYP in such settings have limited opportunities to express their views. This mirrors a broader trend in youth justice research, which continues to be predominantly risk-focused, aligning with the system's priorities (Case & Bateman, 2020). Consequently, there has been a significant lack of inquiry into the lived educational experiences of CYP in YOIs.

Furthermore, risk-focused research is less likely to acknowledge CYP's developmental needs (Barry, 2007; Case & Bateman, 2020) which often results in research designs that do not accommodate the communication or cognitive needs of CYP, thereby limiting their meaningful participation. To address this gap, there is an urgent need for further research that places CYP at the centre, employing child-centric approaches that consider their developmental needs and experiences (Case et al., 2024).

This study aims to make a meaningful contribution to the current limited body of research exploring the lived educational experiences of CYP in YOIs, centring their voices to inform future educational reform using a child-friendly methodology. It addresses the gap noted above by exploring what constitutes meaningful education for CYP within a YOI context. Three research questions guide the research:

1) What are CYP's thoughts (perceptions) about, feelings towards, and experiences of learning within YOIs?
2) What future goals are CYP in YOIs working towards?
3) How do CYP think education support in YOIs might be adapted to help them engage in more meaningful learning?

3.2.7 Researcher Position

Guided by an interpretivist epistemology, the researcher acknowledges their active role in meaning-making, with their own underlying assumptions contributing to the co-construction of data alongside participants.

The researcher undertook this study as part of their Educational Psychology training, drawing on prior experience working within a YOI. This professional background fostered an interest in exploring the perspectives of CYP and the interaction between educational systems and the youth justice system. The researcher's focus on the potential value of meaningful education in YOIs informed the selection of the research setting. To mitigate the impact of personal biases, particularly

their favourable view of education, the researcher utilised reflexive diaries (Appendix F) and engaged in supervision throughout the data collection and analysis stages.

3.3 Method

This study is reported in line with the COREQ guidelines (Tong et al., 2007), the checklist is included in Appendix G.

3.3.1 Participants

Eight young males from a YOI in England, aged sixteen to eighteen, participated in the study. Table 4 presents their ages and additional contextual details, including a pseudonym (assigned by the researcher), incentive and earned privilege (IEP) level, and ethnicity. The IEP level represents a young person's status within the IEP system, classified as basic, standard, or enhanced, with higher levels granted more privileges based on positive behaviour and engagement in rehabilitation. CYP typically enter custody on the standard level and can move up or down depending on their behaviour and engagement (Ministry of Justice, 2024).

Table 4

Participant Information

Pseudonym	Age	Ethnicity	IEP level
Elijah	17	Black/Black British: Caribbean	Standard
Rafiq	18	Asian/Asian British: Bangladeshi	Enhanced
Marek	18	White: any other background	Enhanced
Sam	18	White: British	Enhanced
Chris	18	Black/Black British: Caribbean	Standard
Josh	18	White: British	Standard

Jayden	16	Mixed: any other background	Basic
Shaquille	16	Black/Black British: any other background	Standard

3.3.2 Research Design

A qualitative research design was deemed most appropriate to answer the research questions as it enables an in-depth exploration of the CYP's lived experiences. Semi-structured interviews were used for data collection, with Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA; Smith, et al., 2022) as the chosen analytical approach.

3.3.3 Materials

A semi-structured interview topic guide (Appendix H) with open-ended questions was used to facilitate the interviews, enabling participants to share their experiences, thoughts, and feelings in their own words. The guide balanced flexibility with focus (Smith et al., 2022), allowing participants to answer the research questions while also giving them the space to express what felt most meaningful to them.

Two child-friendly tools informed the topic guide. The first was an adapted version of the 'Three Houses' tool developed by Weld and Greening (2004). Rooted in solution-focused theory, strengths-based practice, and resiliency theory, this tool is designed to build rapport and empower participants to share their experiences. Participants were invited to draw and talk about their school of worries, their school of good things, and their school of dreams. They were encouraged to focus on each 'school' in turn, choosing and illustrating the experiences most important to them. Some participants spent a few minutes drawing/writing before discussing each drawing, while others preferred to talk as they drew. Some participants chose not to draw, preferring to talk through each of their 'schools'. This flexible approach helped to create a space where participants could express themselves.

The second tool was an adapted version of William and Hanke's (2007) 'Drawing the Ideal School' technique, based on Heather Moran's (2001) 'Drawing the Ideal Self' and grounded in Personal Construct Psychology (PCP; Kelly, 1992). Participants were asked to draw their ideal school to help them achieve the goals they outlined in their 'School of Dreams.' Again, participants could draw or write before discussing their ideas, talk as they drew, or describe their 'ideal school' without drawing if they preferred. This aspect of the tool was used to explore how CYP experienced education in YOIs and how it could be adapted to support more meaningful engagement. The researcher did not ask participants to draw a non-ideal school or use the scaling component of the technique, as these elements did not directly align with the study's research questions.

Together, these visual and participatory tools supported CYP to communicate their experiences and ideas in a way that felt comfortable and accessible, generating rich, detailed data that directly addressed the study aims.

3.3.4 Ethics

Ethical approval was first obtained from the University of Southampton (ERGO number: 90977) followed by ethical approval from HMPPS via the integrated research application system (IRAS; IRAS number: 340813). HMPPS reserved the right to withdraw participants at any stage if they were deemed unsuitable for the study (e.g., due to risk). Informed consent was obtained from participants, as detailed in the recruitment section below.

Data was pseudonymised during transcription to ensure confidentiality, and all audio recordings were subsequently deleted. Similarly, demographic information, provided verbally by an identified member of staff in the YOI, was recorded on a University of Southampton laptop and pseudoanonymised. Lastly, drawings from interviews were not analysed but photographed and securely stored on the university's system, while physical copies were shredded on-site at the YOI. Digital copies were retained only for the researcher to reference if participants mentioned them in their interviews.

3.3.5 Recruitment

Purposive sampling was employed: the researcher specifically sought participants aged 16-18 (the majority of the YOI population, approximately 96%) who had been sentenced. Children aged 15 were not included in the recruitment process due to perceived barriers to obtaining informed consent, which could have affected the ethical integrity of the study. Furthermore, CYP who had an 'on remand' status were not included in this study, since the nature of this status can add additional stress or uncertainty regarding their legal situation (Freeman, 2009). Excluding these groups ensured that participants were in a stable position to provide informed consent and participate fully. Additionally, only those with at least one month remaining on their sentence were included, to minimise the risk of participant drop-out.

A two-step recruitment process was used to ensure that participants could give informed consent. Initially, the researcher presented child-friendly information sheets (Appendix I) and consent forms (Appendix J) verbally to CYP in their YOI education classes. To ensure accessibility, these materials were made in collaboration with the supervisory team, with input from a Speech and Language Therapist who worked in a YOI. Face-to-face, verbal delivery was crucial for participant understanding, especially given the high level of SENs in this population (Office of National Statistics, 2022). It also enabled real-time clarification of questions.

Any eligible CYP who could not attend these sessions were still invited to participate. For these individuals, additional time was allocated during rapport-building sessions (discussed in the data collection section) to ensure they fully understood the study and their rights and had the opportunity to ask questions.

Secondly, a designated key contact within the YOI distributed consent forms and child-friendly participant information sheets to all eligible CYP. Participants returned sealed consent forms to unit staff. A designated key contact then collected these envelopes. Initially, the researcher aimed to randomly select participants from those who provided consent. However, only 10 participants

consented, and the YOI excluded two due to identified risk factors. As a result, all remaining eligible participants were included in the study.

3.3.6 Data Collection

Demographic data, including age, ethnicity, gender, and IEP level, were collected for each participant. A HMPPS-designated staff member provided this information. Participants were verbally informed that this data was being collected, with this also noted in writing on the participant information sheet. Pre-interview rapport-building sessions and research interviews, outlined below, were conducted by the primary researcher, a Trainee Educational Psychologist.

Pre-Interview Rapport-Building Session. Each participant engaged in a one-to-one rapport-building session prior to the research interview. The sessions took place in a confidential space within the YOI and aimed to establish trust. During this session, the researcher:

- Revisited the participant information sheet, ensuring the individual understood the study and their rights.
- Reconfirmed consent, ensuring the participant was comfortable proceeding with the study.
- Engaged in a game (e.g., Uno™, Dobble™), chosen by the participant, to foster rapport.

The session lasted approximately 20 minutes and was neither recorded nor transcribed.

Research Interview. The interview was conducted in a confidential space, where possible on the same day as the rapport-building session or as soon as feasible (e.g., the next working day).

One-to-one interviews followed the semi-structured format, guided by the topic guide described in the 'materials' section (section 3.3.3). Interviews lasted up to 60 minutes and participants were offered breaks if needed. Upon completion, participants received a debrief form (Appendix K) outlining support options.

Each interview was voice-recorded on a University of Southampton dictaphone that had received approval from HMPPS. The researcher manually transcribed the recordings verbatim by typing them into Microsoft Word.

3.3.7 Data analysis

Data was analysed using IPA (Smith et al., 2022), an approach well-suited to exploring participants' lived and subjective experiences in depth (Willig, 2021). Rooted in phenomenology, hermeneutics, and idiography, IPA enables a detailed examination of how individuals make sense of their experiences (phenomenology). It emphasises the participant's perspective while recognising that interpretation is an active, collaborative process (hermeneutics) between the researcher and participant (Smith & Fieldsend, 2021). Lastly, it highlights the importance of individual experiences, focusing on the particularities of each participant (idiography), rather than seeking broad generalisations (Smith et al., 2022).

The steps outlined in Table 5 (Smith et al., 2022) describe the data analysis process completed by the primary researcher. Examples of each step of the process are provided in Appendix L.

Table 5

Process of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis

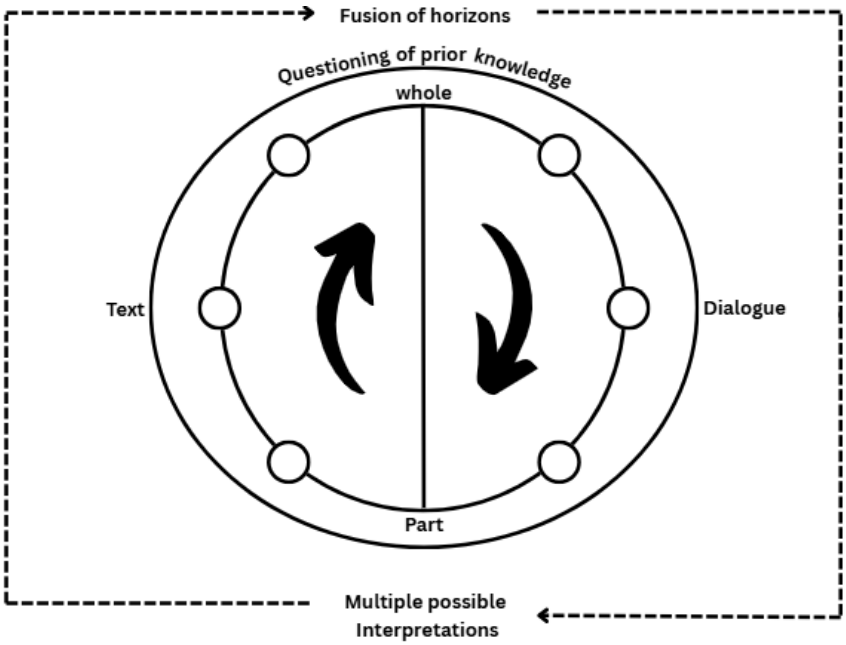
Step	Process Description
1 – Starting with the first case: Reading and re-reading	The researcher immersed themselves in the first case, listening to the audio recording while typing the interview, and reading the transcript at least twice.
2 – Exploratory noting	With an open mind, the researcher notes anything of interest in the margin of the first transcript.
3 – Constructing experiential statements	The researcher constructed statements that directly reflect the participant's experience or sense-making of events.
4 – Searching for connections across experiential statements	The researcher identified connections between the statements within each transcript and grouped them into personal experiential themes (PETs).

5 – Naming the personal experiential themes (PETs) and consolidating and organising them in a table	The researcher named the PETs and organised them into a table.
6 – Continue the individual analysis of other cases	The researcher repeated the process for subsequent transcripts, applying the same steps.
7 – Working with personal experiential themes to develop group experiential themes across cases	The researcher compared PETs across transcripts, identifying similarities and differences to create group experiential themes (GETs).

It is important to note that this process was not linear; both individual and group data were regularly revisited. Data analysis was carried out through an iterative process, supported by the hermeneutic circle (Figure 4). The researcher continually shifted focus between the 'part' and the 'whole' across multiple levels. For example, detailed aspects of participants' accounts (the 'part') and the broader narrative of participants' experiences (the 'whole'). This process took place within the context of the researcher's own horizons (experiences, beliefs, prior knowledge), which were continually reflected upon. Interpretation occurred through a 'fusion of horizons', as the researcher's perspective was both challenged and enriched by participants' perspectives.

Figure 4

The Hermeneutic Circle, adapted from Peat et al., (2019)

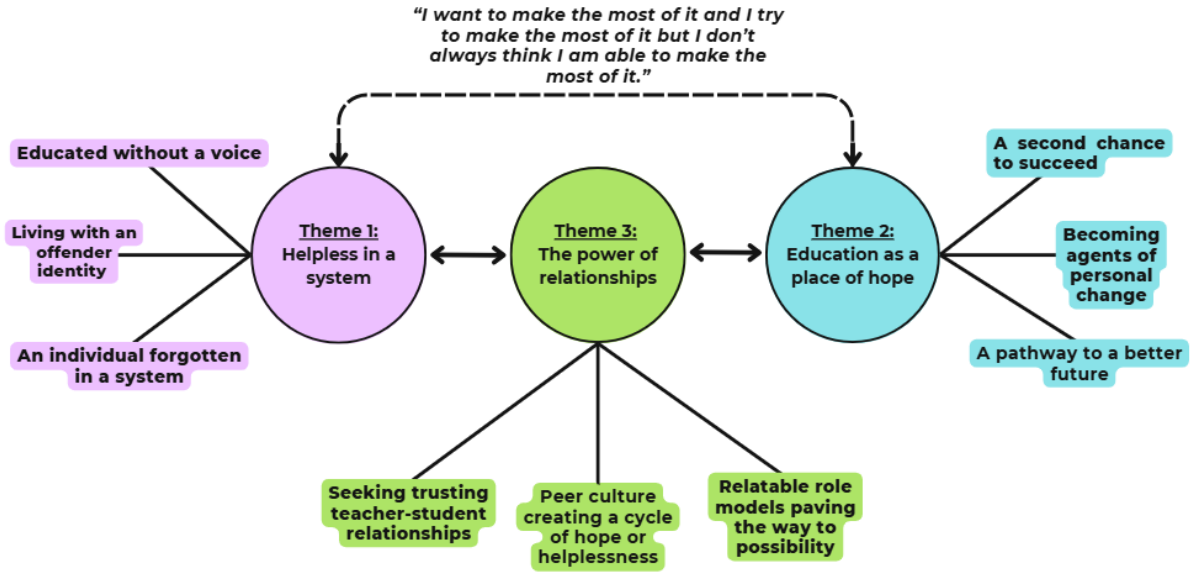


3.4 Results

Three GETs were generated: 'Helplessness in a system', 'Education as a place of hope', and 'The power of relationships'. Three subthemes were identified for each GET, as shown in Figure 5. The identified PETs are presented in Appendix M.

Figure 5

Thematic Map



3.4.1 GET One: Helpless in a system

In the YOI, CYP experienced restrictions on their autonomy, impacting every aspect of their lives "So, we are pretty much going from a cell to another cell, to another cell. We're pretty much always locked up" (Marek). It was impossible to view their educational experiences outside this broader context of helplessness, which shaped both their accounts and the researcher's interpretation. Education, usually linked to growth, rehabilitation, and empowerment, became yet another space where CYP felt physically and psychologically "locked up". This sense of helplessness

was so pervasive that when asked to describe their ideal school, several participants responded with resignation: “We’ll never be able to change it cos we’re in jail. It’s just never going to happen” (Sam).

This helplessness in a system was experienced in three distinct ways: being educated without a voice, being forgotten in a system, and living with an offender identity.

Subtheme One: Educated without a Voice. All participants expressed a lack of autonomy over their education, though the nature of this disempowerment varied considerably.

For some, education was acutely felt as an imposition. Two participants described how they felt the YOI would “stick” (Marek) or “put” (Sam) them into education, rather than giving them a choice about whether they wanted to attend. Refusing to participate, even when it felt as though it wasn’t personally meaningful, resulted in punishment “What they do is if you decline education, they will turn your power off and give you a yellow card. And when you get a yellow card, that means no association” (Sam). Participants felt it was easier to attend education or “to stay quiet, otherwise you are punished” (Marek). This was particularly frustrating for these participants who had passed their qualifications in the community and were beyond the age of compulsory education “After 16, you should be able to choose if you want to go to education or not” (Marek). When participants were forced into learning, it felt meaningless “Everyone’s just going there for the sake of it. No one’s actually doing any work. No one’s actually getting any knowledge” (Rafiq).

While some participants felt forced to engage in education, others were denied access, even when motivated to learn “That’s a whole month in your cell. You’re just sitting on the landing playing games or whatever. That’s not constructive for the mind, you know?” (Josh). Not being able to attend education appeared to make participants feel just as helpless as being forced to attend, because there was little space for growth and flourishing “I’ve been here for like a year and a bit and I haven’t done anything” (Elijah).

Even when participants were placed in subjects they were motivated to pursue and learning they found meaningful, they still had no control over their educational journey “So I was going to take my qualification in horticulture, but they moved me onto a different pathway” (Jayden).

Participants expressed frustration about being “moved” (Jayden), “shipped” (Marek), or transferred “halfway” (Shaquille) through a course. This instability left participants feeling unmotivated and helpless; Shaquille and Marek often referred to learning tasks as “pointless”.

Given participants' strong sense of lack of autonomy, it is unsurprising that they felt unheard, a sentiment shared by nearly all the participants. As Shaquille succinctly summarised toward the end of his interview “Literally, we just need to be heard in this jail.” Yet, their feelings of helplessness were only reinforced when they attempted to speak up, as their voices were often ignored “When you do still try to get your words out and so on it doesn’t really get heard” (Rafiq) and so were their choices “There’s no point giving us choices if you are going to do what you want to do” (Shaquille).

These feelings of helplessness were further reflected in the way participants, such as Elijah, Chris and Shaquille, imagined their ideal school. In contrast to their current experiences, they envisioned a space where they had full control over their learning journey, “I’d be the headteacher” (Elijah).

Subtheme Two: An Individual Forgotten in a System. All participants were in the process of developing a sense of identity, but they felt that this was not acknowledged by the system, leaving them feeling like “just another name… number” (Rafiq).

Some described themselves using age-related labels “adult” (Sam), “kid” (Marek), “not an adult, but like maturely” (Jayden). These self-ascribed labels did not appear to correspond to their chronological age. Instead, they seemed to reflect their specific needs: independence (Sam), nurture (Marek) and support during a liminal period (Jayden). At times, participants oscillated between describing themselves as “children” and “adults”, perhaps indicating that they were still navigating identity formation. Participants’ identities also seemed to be shaped by their past educational experiences:

> I used to be smart and ret-tet-tet, but I haven’t been in school for time, so I’ve lost some of the things I could do. So, I need them to help me and stuff. (Shaquille)

> Most of them haven't gone to school. Most of them don't know how to do the very basics. It's like they're not going to want to learn if you just stick them in a classroom, come up to them, sit them in a chair and ask them to do some work. (Marek)

Both Shaquille and Marek had internalised the belief that they were no longer "smart" or capable of the "very basics", showing how their previous school experiences had shaped their self-perception and their need for an alternative, supportive curriculum.

Despite their unique needs and identities, nearly all participants felt as though they were "forgotten" (Rafiq). Rather than being acknowledged as individuals, they described the YOI approach "They just dump a load of people in one room. A lot of people with different sets, different skills" (Marek). Some participants experienced this as a space where they were not challenged:

> When the work's like way too easy. Like, I'm 18, I already know what 2 + 2 is. (Chris)

> 46 plus 32 or something. You know what I mean? When I'm supposed to be doing trigonometry or something. (Josh)

Whilst others felt as though they did not receive appropriate support for their needs:

> Then they just punish me for reacting, but they're not helping me. So then, what's the point of me even coming back tomorrow? (Marek)

> Then the other one that's behind, is always going to end up giving up. He's going to be the one messing about because he can see that he's not getting it. He's not up to the standards. Or he's not gaining the knowledge that he thought he was going to gain because there's no, because he's in a group with different ability people. (Rafiq)

Despite these differing perspectives, participants highlighted a shared outcome: disengagement due to a lack of differentiation and a feeling of helplessness.

When imagining their ideal school, participants envisioned spaces that acknowledged their backgrounds and lived experiences, something that felt more personal and reflective of who they are:

> I'd probably name it like, I had a name in my head, it's going to come back to me. The school of hard knocks. (Chris)

> Obviously, we will have some of black history as well… so the kids feel... you get me? Involved. (Shaquille)

Whether it's their life experiences ("school of hard knocks") or their individual identities ("black history"), participants wanted an education "diverse in everything" (Shaquille) so that "everyone is included" (Josh).

Subtheme Three: Living with an 'Offender' Identity. Residing in a YOI inherently comes with the imposed label of "offender". Living with this label affected how participants were treated and how they saw themselves.

The label and institutional practices left some of the participants feeling dehumanised and stripped of their childhood identities. For example, Marek stated "It's almost like you are taking the humanity out of the child" (Marek). The sense of dehumanisation also permeated educational spaces intended for growth and development:

> Getting searched... like... you're in prison, so I understand it's a protocol, but if you go to education, like, you shouldn't really be... I don't want to be a prisoner... that's already corrupting my mind before I've even started learning. (Rafiq)

Neither participant wanted to be treated like a "prisoner" (Rafiq) instead, they wanted to be treated like a "normal person" (Marek).

Despite this, they described themselves as "criminal" (Jayden), "detainee" (Shaquille), "violent", "lifer" (Marek) and a "black sheep" (Rafiq). This use of terminology suggested that

they had internalised the labels imposed upon them. This internalisation shaped their self-perception in educational settings where they experienced 'othering':

> You can't apply the same concept of a person on the outside of their behaviour in school and someone in here and their behaviour in the classroom. It's going to be two completely different things. (Marek)

> They just treat us like school kids… we're not like… do you know what I'm saying? We're criminals. (Jayden)

Participants felt distinctly different from other "school kids" their age, reinforcing a marginalised sense of identity. Both participants also imply that they desire different treatment from the supporting adults in education, treatment that acknowledges their complex identities and unique needs linked to their 'offender' label.

Participants experienced (Sam, who was in the YOI for the second time) and anticipated (Marek, Josh) that the 'offender' label would continue to impact their lives following release:

> Nowhere would take me and stuff like that. Just 'cause I've been in prison... they're like, ah taking a prisoner into school is... (Sam)

> Obviously, once you come out on a life sentence, you're on license for the rest of your life and it's really difficult to find jobs and opportunities cos a lot of people look at you differently and a lot of people judge you (Marek)

> The reason I'm doing mechanics first is that I'm waiting five years because of my convictions (Josh)

Ultimately, these labels contributed to their sense of identity and a pervasive sense of helplessness, defined by their past, leaving little space for self-improvement or the hope of reintegration into society. Many of the participants expressed that their future dreams had to change because of their time in the YOI. Rafiq encapsulated this sense of helplessness "my dreams and ambitions have been

shut out", highlighting how the offender label continues to shape their lives long after their sentence ends.

3.4.2 GET Two: Education as a place of hope

In stark contrast to the pervasive helplessness participants described, education was also seen as a powerful site of hope and potential. Rafiq's vision of his ideal school captured this sense of possibility:

> It gives you that joy of… yes I've just entered the education zone. I have just entered a zone of peace, harmony, where everyone around me is striving for the better… for themselves. (Rafiq)

Within the confines of the YOI, participants described education as a space of hope: a place where they had a second chance to succeed, where they were becoming agents of personal change and forging a pathway to a better future.

Subtheme One: Becoming Agents of Personal Change. Despite their overall lack of autonomy, participants described a feeling of personal agency in education, a key facet of hope. For some participants, a sense of agency manifested as responsibility over their learning and effort:

> The teachers do try to strive for the YPs. For them to gain knowledge and what not. But at the end of the day no one can force you to learn… it's up to you if you really want to learn. (Rafiq)

Similarly, Sam used the phrase "they're not going to force you" further reinforcing the narrative that participants are responsible for their change. Moments of success, especially when they felt their success was the result of their own efforts, played a key role in reinforcing this sense of agency:

> A lot of things I've achieved here… I've had support don't get me wrong but I've had to do it off my own back. (Josh)

> That's something I chose to do by myself with no support. (Rafiq)

Experiences of success helped reinforce participants' belief in their abilities and self-efficacy. Over time, some participants began to internalise the belief that they were personal agents of change "If you can believe that you can do a lot of stuff… you will end up doing a lot of stuff" (Rafiq). This suggests that personal agency, reinforced through success, helped participants to feel hopeful about their futures.

The sense of agency resulted in some participants changing their mindset and their behaviour in education:

> Before, I was thinking, 'hell no, that's all long' now I realise it's actually very important. (Chris)

> At the start, I would zone out of work and into their conversation; now, it's that I zone out of the conversation and into my work. (Josh)

> Lots of people are on different stages of their sentence, different mindsets. But obviously for me I'm tryna, I've kinda got my head screwed on now. I don't really fuck about in class. (Marek)

These reflections illustrate a shift from changes in thinking to meaningful action, a key sign that participants were becoming active agents of their own change and developing a more hopeful outlook.

Subtheme Two: A 'Second Chance' to Succeed. Many participants were in the process of change, perceiving education in the YOI as a "second chance" (Elijah) to obtain qualifications they once thought were out of reach. Elijah was contemplating change "I'm going to redo my GCSEs and pass because I didn't pass on the roads, innit." His reference to "the roads" highlighted how his previous environment shaped his disengagement from education. In contrast, he viewed education within the YOI as a hopeful, viable path to rewriting his educational journey. Other participants were actively working towards qualifications they had previously attempted in the community:

That's a good thing… I'm doing that. Cos I was doing it on the outside, I ended up paying twice. (Sam)

Yeah, it was very positive that I got to do those because on the outside, this is like my 7th time doing GCSE maths. (Rafiq)

Both Sam and Rafiq described experiencing significant barriers to education prior to incarceration, particularly the financial burden of retaking qualifications. Their use of language such as "good" and "very positive" suggests that they saw the YOI as a more supportive environment to engage in education. The removal of financial obstacles, in particular, was a source of relief "I'm in prison, why not get an education for free? So yeah, I decided to do my GCSE maths again" (Rafiq).

Similarly, Josh experienced education in the YOI as more supportive than education in the community. His educational experience before custody had been disrupted "So, it was like… I ended up with about… a year and a half out of five years of schooling. That's not really…". However, he proudly shared his GCSE results, achieved in the YOI "I passed them. I did the May ones. I got a five for maths and a seven for English." This contrast highlighted how education in the YOI not only provided Josh with formal qualifications but also restored his sense of self-worth and belief in his academic capability.

As well as being a space to obtain qualifications that once felt out of reach, participants' descriptions of their 'ideal school' revealed they also measured success in emotional terms. They perceived education to be a place that could make them feel "happy" (Elijah, Rafiq), "joy" (Marek), "great" (Elijah), "proud" (Chris, Josh), "calm" (Jayden), "excited" (Shaquille) and as though they were "fulfilling potential" (Josh). These emotional expressions suggest that, for all of the participants, success was not just about academic achievement but also about how education made them feel.

Education in the YOI was experienced as a more accessible and positive setting than participants had encountered in the community. This environment provided them with a second chance at learning and a clearer pathway toward a better future.

Subtheme Three: Education as a Pathway to a Better Future. Education was more than a means to gain qualifications, it was a pivotal "stepping stone" (Marek) towards a stable and meaningful future. Some participants viewed education as a pathway to better employment prospects:

> So, I can get more jobs or whatever (Shaquille)

> Then the level three fitness management, again, that's another option for me (Josh)

> Obviously, the list of jobs I can get will be wider (Chris)

Participants' references to "wider", "more", and "options" emphasised how education expanded choice. By gaining qualifications, they were not just preparing for employment but breaking free from past barriers. This, in turn, provided a new sense of stability and agency for their future, where they could "Go get a job, help me get back on my feet" (Elijah).

Beyond career prospects, some participants saw education as a way to reduce reoffending and create lasting change:

> Education does lead you to the right path. It always does. It keeps you on a stead path meaning, that with education you're most likely not to do… go on the wrong side. Look left when you're meant to be looking right. (Rafiq)

Rafiq's metaphor, "Look left when you're meant to be looking right", reflected internal conflict between past mistakes and positive change. Education, for Rafiq, was a guiding force that helped him stay on track, making him less likely to re-offend. Ultimately, education offered a pathway out of past struggles and towards hopeful futures.

3.4.3 GET Three: The power of relationships

This theme explores how relationships shaped participants' educational experiences, influencing their oscillation between hope and helplessness "You've come into the classroom, and

they've been nice straight away… it breaks the tension. If you've come into the classroom and your teacher is like meh…" (Josh).

Three subthemes were identified: seeking trusting teacher-student relationships, peer culture creating a cycle of hope or helplessness, and relatable role models paving the way to possibility.

Subtheme One: Seeking Trusting Teacher-Student Relationships. In the context of the YOI, the "most depressing place" (Rafiq), trusting relationships were perceived as being key to remaining "mentally strong" (Marek). When participants envisioned their 'ideal school', Josh wanted "mental health support as well because that can have an impact on your learning"; this looked like "meaningful conversations" with his teachers. For others, a sense of connection with their teacher could support their wellbeing:

> The teacher would probably be teaching them blackjack. Or yeah… playing some card games (Chris)

> Let's say the teacher is trying to have a good bond… you will have a little nickname for eachother (Shaquille)

> Like have a banter side to them (Jayden)

These responses illustrate a shared longing for relational connection, where emotional support, humour, and informal interactions with teachers were essential. Some participants described the effects of such relationships on their learning "I respect both of them quite highly. So, I work even harder in their lessons" (Marek) and wellbeing "Obviously, that benefits me and functioning in life, if you feel like you're wanted there" (Josh).

It was also important for teachers be intrinsically motivated and go "above and beyond" (Marek) to show participants that they cared:

> They were doing it out their own will in their own free time (Rafiq)

> The teachers would come out of their own sort of… not in the school day. (Josh)

Such gestures symbolised an emotional investment, signalling care that extended beyond contractual obligation, promoting trust. One participant also highlighted that a meaningful teacher-student relationship required acceptance of the whole person, including challenging behaviours, Marek described an 'ideal' teacher as someone willing to "put up with the boys bullshit" (Marek). This comment reflects Marek's desire for unconditional positive regard and forgiveness.

A recurring thread in the data was the importance of balancing nurture with authority. Participants needed to feel safe, but they also needed personal connection:

> When you do take your job too serious that's when you don't build kind of good relationships with children. (Shaquille)

> Somethin' engaging like you can do your work but also engage with the teacher at the same time. (Sam)

> Not so like strict… if that makes sense? I know there's rules and regulations in jail but like interact more. (Jayden)

These reflections suggest that participants did not reject structure of discipline, instead, they sought a relational approach to authority where boundaries coexist with warmth, interaction and mutual respect.

Participants also desired teacher-student relationships where they could trust that their teacher would advocate for their future, demonstrating that they care:

> He's going to fight to make sure we get the qualification. (Marek)

> They actually care about us like achieving in life. (Elijah)

> Keep us on track innit (Chris)

However, not all teachers in the YOI were perceived to be intrinsically motivated. Rafiq noted critically "Really and truly, they are just there to do a job and go back to their family" and

others referenced “they get paid” (Marek), reflecting a broader dissatisfaction with teachers who were perceived as disengaged or uninterested in CYPs’ lives beyond the classroom. When teachers appeared uninterested, some participants disengaged:

> Like, if I was going to go into a class with a teacher like, that’s just bare quiet, and I don’t know, they’re not too interactive, then it’s not going to be a good, like… I won’t really work hard… I will just talk to my friends. (Shaquille)

Previous relationships appeared to shape the lens in which participants saw their current relationships “some people might do it out of the genuineness of their heart… I don’t know. That’s life” (Rafiq). Rafiq’s statement implied a sense of guarded hope and a resignation of disappointment shaped by “life”. Josh similarly reflected on previous relationships, "Not everyone in here necessarily has family outside, or if they do, it might not be family that’s close, disjointed”.

Ultimately, trusting teacher-student relationships were the foundation for wellbeing, learning, and motivation.

Subtheme Two: Peer Culture Creating a Cycle of Hope or Helplessness. The culture within the peer community played a pivotal role in fostering hope or helplessness. For many participants, education within the YOI was not experienced as a space for learning, but primarily as a means to escape the confinement and boredom of their cells:

> It’s almost like boys come here just to get out of their cells. They don’t even care about the education side of it. (Marek)

> It’s like cool… we’ll just go education to get out our rooms not really to come to education, innit. (Jayden)

As a result of the peer culture, education was loud and described as “a social club” (Rafiq). For those who valued education, this was a source of deep frustration and distraction “It’s like when I put my pen to paper the shouting starts again” (Chris).

As well as feeling frustrated, participants who remained committed to their education frequently felt isolated “They literally try and pull you down, drag you down with them. Cos they can’t achieve something, so they don’t want you to achieve it” (Marek) and demotivated “If other people don’t want to be there, you start to wonder why you’re there” (Josh). In such an environment, even motivated learners may begin to disengage, as the surrounding apathy makes it challenging to sustain personal change and hope.

However, many participants also identified the potential for peer culture to offer much-needed support. For example, Chris shared how his peers sometimes supported him “We motivate each other sometimes.” Furthermore, when they described their ideal schools, participants envisioned a supportive peer environment:

> I think when peers can support each other and peers are learning the same thing they can work together. You know, great minds think alike and all that. Two brains a better than one, you know? (Josh)

> We’re always together so at the end of the day we are a community. We all need to work together to be able to achieve certain things. (Marek)

> I want kids that will cheer on each other on (Shaquille)

This sense of community and shared responsibility not only promotes educational success but also builds a stronger sense of belonging, where each person’s success is intertwined with the success of the group. Participants believed that a culture of belonging, and mutual support could break the cycle of disengagement and create more hopeful learning environments.

Subtheme Three: Relatable Role Models Paving the Way to Possibility. Across all interviews, role models were central to fostering hope and shaping future aspirations. For many, family was a significant source of inspiration. Jayden referred to his ambition to work in a “family business,” while others articulated specific career goals rooted in familial influence “My family all cooks as well, so I would like to set up a little restaurant” (Shaquille).

Beyond vocational goals, several participants highlighted family members who had positively influenced their educational or personal development:

> My grandpa has just passed away, but when he was around, he was always very encouraging and would always sit down with me and spend time on my homework. I'm very appreciative and grateful. (Josh)

In an environment where family "support is very limited" (Marek), some participants turned to new role models who offered hope and guidance. These included officers and staff members with relatable experiences or vocational backgrounds:

> Like I get along with her very well like, she used to be a chef before she came here innit. So, like if I wanna pursue catering, I'd be good at it and that, let's have a shot at it and see. (Elijah)

> I think cadets have been very helpful, officers, even, that have served and that. It's been quite good chatting to different people and finding out about their experiences. (Josh)

Such connections broadened participants' views, professional pathways and vocational interests, creating the cognitive flexibility needed for 'pathway thinking' and hopeful futures.

Despite these positive influences, some participants experienced a lingering sense of helplessness: they desired role models who were "once upon a time a criminal" (Rafiq). Marek elaborated on this sentiment "I want someone who has sat in a can for sixteen years and has come out and achieved something in his life and can come in and be almost like a ray of sunshine." The authenticity of such role models was rooted in experiential credibility; they needed to have overcome similar adversity to offer real hope. When participants had the opportunity to engage with such individuals, they felt genuinely empowered "I could connect with them and change the way I am and the way I was acting" (Josh). However, these opportunities were perceived to be limited.

Notably, some participants did not simply want to receive support from role models, they aspired to become them. Several envisioned using their experience to guide others away from offending and toward more hopeful futures:

> I wanted to open a place that would help kids that were in a similar situation to what I was when I was outside and try to help them find something that they enjoy doing. Almost show them that there is hope. (Marek)

> I was considering like having a clean record for 5 years then coming to work in a prison as well because you can tell your story to the other kids that are in jail and try and make them not come back. (Sam)

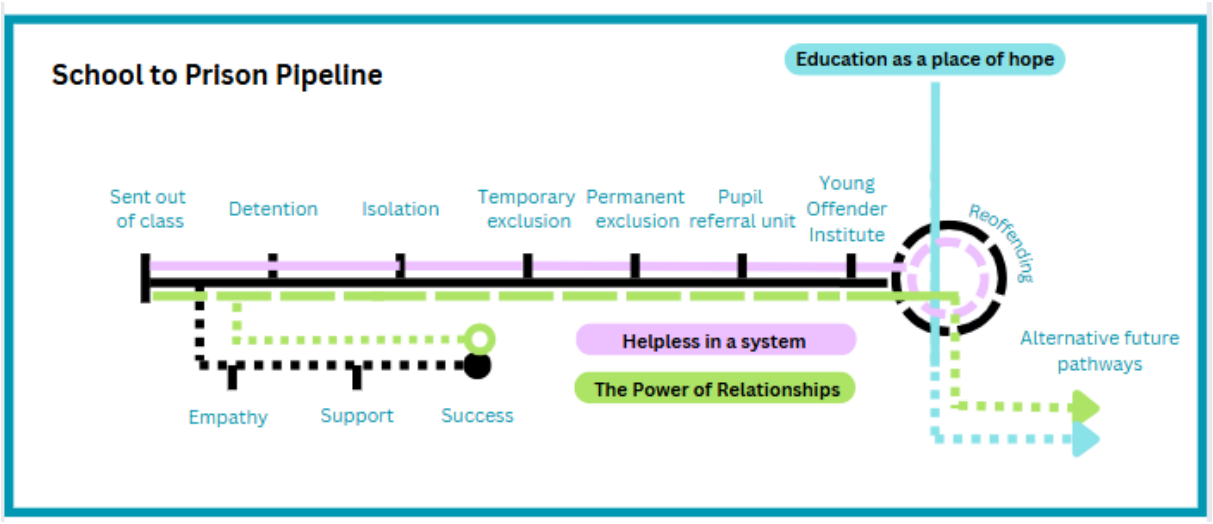
Similarly, Chris described planned to launch a podcast titled "Jail Tales," aimed at supporting CYP to make positive life choices.

These accounts reflect a powerful cycle of hope: participants moving from recipients of inspiration to aspiring agents of change for others. In imagining themselves as future mentors, participants affirmed their own potential for change.

3.5 Discussion

Focusing specifically on CYP's lived educational experiences within a YOI, this study makes a valuable contribution to the limited body of qualitative research in this area. It moves beyond the established 'school to prison pipeline' metaphor, which is often portrayed as a linear pathway, by exploring the lived educational experiences of CYP within a YOI. In doing so, it offers insight into what a meaningful education looks like for these CYP and how it might support them to change direction and flourish beyond custody. Figure 6 visualises a reconceptualisation of the 'school-to-prison pipeline' to reflect the trajectories experienced by CYP once they enter a YOI.

Figure 6 Reconceptualised 'School-to-prison pipeline' illustrated as a tube map



Note. An adapted image of the school-to-prison pipeline. From Powerful 'school-to-prison' tube map highlights impact of exclusion on pupils, by G. Chambers, 2018 (https://www.standard.co.uk/news/london/london-students-highlight-school-to-prison-line-on-gcse-results-day-a3918846.html)

CYP in this study echoed the traditional pipeline, experiencing a sense of helplessness in a system that predated custody, persisted during their time in the YOI and which they expected to persist upon release. Akin to learned helplessness, they felt as though they were on a train line over which they had no control and from which they could not disembark. Learned helplessness occurs when individuals are repeatedly exposed to situations where they feel they have no control over outcomes, leading them to stop trying to change or influence their environment, even when opportunities for change exist (Maier & Seligman, 1976). In this context, CYP expressed a sense of universal helplessness, the belief that no CYP, regardless of effort, could effect change within the system (Abramson & Seligman, 1978). Previous research in adult settings has found that the longer an individual remains in a secure setting, the more they develop an attributional style that aligns with learned helplessness (Schill & Marcus, 1998).

Whilst in the YOI, CYP experienced helplessness due to significant restrictions on their autonomy within education and felt their individual needs were not adequately met. These

experiences align with concerns raised in the recent Ofsted and HMPPS report (2024) and echo the broader experiences of CYP across the YOI environment, as highlighted by Case et al. (2024).

Furthermore, rather than being treated like individuals with unique needs, CYP experienced a risk-focused approach in which they felt 'forgotten'. Instead, they felt as though they were labelled and treated as 'offenders', a concern that has been increasingly highlighted in recent literature (Case, 2021a; Case & Bateman, 2020; Day, 2021). Once a child or young person is labelled, particularly with a stigmatised identity (e.g., offender), they are more likely to be judged and treated in accordance with that label (Becker, 1963). Attribution theory (Heider, 1958) helps explain this process. Individuals tend to make internal attributions, assuming that CYP's offending behaviour reflects a fixed personality trait rather than a reaction to adverse life circumstances such as trauma or social exclusion (Ross, 1977). When CYP are consistently categorised as 'offenders', this identity becomes internalised, influencing how they see themselves. This internalisation of negative labels can create cognitive dissonance. Cognitive dissonance is the psychological discomfort experienced when a person simultaneously holds conflicting beliefs, values, or attitudes, creating a motivation to reduce the inconsistency (Festinger, 1962). CYP engaging in education may still view themselves through their internalised 'offender' identity, creating a psychological conflict between their current prosocial actions and their self-concept.

Yet, education was also perceived as a place of hope in the YOI. Figure 6 illustrates that this sense of hope in education was not carried into custody but developed within the YOI itself, where the new 'tube line' intersected with the traditional pipeline. In contrast to their previous experiences, CYP began to see education as a space where meaningful change felt possible. They perceived it as a place where they could pursue their goals to gain qualifications, develop skills, and build confidence for a more stable future. This aligns with the YCS's aim (YCS, n.d.; Coates, 2016), and the overall purpose of education (UNESCO, 2011). The complex emotional dynamic of helplessness and hope aligns with previous research in YOIs (Little, 2015) and SCHs (Octigan, 2018; Shafi, 2019).

Crucially, in the current study these emotional responses were shaped by the relational context. When CYP experienced trusting relationships with adults that reinforced a pro-social identity, they felt hopeful. When these relationships were lacking, they felt helpless. Peer relationships also affected this emotional dynamic, but in a different way. When peers were supportive of learning, CYP described feeling hopeful; when they were not, these interactions reinforced feelings of isolation and helplessness. As illustrated in Figure 6, the power of relationships was significant even before their time in the YOI. However, the dashed line during the pre-custody period indicates that relationships fostering hope during this time were individuals in their microsystem (Bronfenbrenner, 1977), such as family members, rather than those who had the power to influence the system in which they felt helpless (education). Within the YOI, CYP saw relationships with both adults and peers as key to fostering a sense of hope, offering a more nuanced perspective than recent research that reported predominantly poor relational experiences among CYP in custody (Ofsted & HMPPS, 2024).

Snyder's (2000) Hope Theory offers a useful framework for understanding these experiences. Hope emerges through three key components: the ability to set meaningful goals, identify pathways to achieve them, and maintain a sense of agency throughout the process. In this study, CYP felt able to give education a 'second chance' and set goals when they felt relationally safe, experienced a sense of belonging, and when they believed they had the skills to succeed. These needs align with the foundational levels of Maslow's hierarchy (1943), which proposes that humans must first satisfy basic needs such as safety, belonging and self-esteem before they can pursue higher-level goals such as achievement and ultimately reach self-actualisation (knowing who they are and being the best version of themselves). Without feeling safe or accepted, CYP were less able to engage in the higher-order thinking and planning required to set and pursue future goals.

Relationships were also essential in helping CYP identify multiple routes and strategies to achieve their goals, the second key component of hope (Snyder, 2000). Interaction with positive role models, such as individuals who had previously been in a YOI or staff members from diverse vocational backgrounds who had taken their own individualised journeys to reach their goals, had

the power to show that change was possible (Bandura, 1977). These role models illuminated that multiple different routes exist on the pipeline. Similarly, peer relationships had the potential to foster a shift from individual to collective thinking. Collective thinking enables individuals to achieve more than they could alone (Mercer, 2013), allowing CYP to access broader pathways towards their goals.

Lastly, agency represents the motivational component of hope, the self-belief that drives movement towards a goal (Snyder, 2000). Trusting relationships, where teachers invested time in understanding CYP as individuals, helped shift negative self-attributions, reduced cognitive dissonance, and fostered a pro-social identity, reframing participants as 'learners' rather than 'offenders'. These relational dynamics enabled participants to experience a sense of success in their learning. Experiences of success helped to sustain motivation (Bandura, 1997) and cultivate a growing sense of agency over their educational journey.

3.5.1 Implications for Practice and Research

For CYP in YOIs, consistent access to education is essential, not just for learning, but because education provides the crucial space where relationships can cultivate hope and alternative pathways beyond custody can be imagined. Despite this being the goal of the YCS (YCS, n.d.; Coates, 2016) this potential is not currently utilised (Ofsted & HMPPS, 2024).

Implications for education professionals. While CYP did identify some relationships that made them feel hopeful, they also expressed a strong desire for more high-quality, trusting connections. Educators and practitioners must foster relational approaches by taking time, listening, showing consistent support, and nurturing trust (Fullerton et al., 2021). These relationships should be enacted in a way that makes CYP feel they are being done 'with' rather than 'to', meaning interactions require empathy and support alongside clear boundaries (McCold & Wachtel, 2003). For this population, who are more likely to have experienced ACEs (Gray et al., 2021), PACE (playfulness, acceptance, curiosity and empathy) is a useful approach for educators to foster such relationships that promote safety and connection (Hughes, 2016).

There is also an urgent need to treat CYP as individuals, rather than reducing them to labels such as 'offender'. This shift would allow CYP to develop a pro-social identity, which is essential for their rehabilitation and future success (Case & Bateman, 2020). Attribution theory (Heider, 1958) alongside labelling theory (Becker, 1963) suggests that when staff attitudes and systemic practices consistently reinforce negative labels, CYP are more likely to accept these fixed, internal attributions. Therefore, breaking this cycle requires not only reconsidering the language used but also ensuring that all interactions consistently support CYP's potential for growth and pro-social identity development, rather than reinforcing their 'offender' identity. This approach not only supports individual development but also positively influences the broader peer culture (Tajfel & Fraser, 1990). Changing this culture can support the promotion of hope (McDermott & Hastings, 2000; Snyder & Feldman, 2000).

Using person-centred planning approaches, grounded in humanistic psychology, could further support educational professionals in shifting their attributions of CYP, encouraging them to see them more holistically rather than through the lens of past behaviour or fixed labels. Person-centred planning prioritises the individual's unique needs, experiences and aspirations (Rogers, 1951), which can enable staff to develop a deeper understanding of their contextual factors, making them less likely to make fixed internal attributions. Previous research highlights the importance of such approaches, showing that staff in YOIs benefit from frameworks that support a better understanding of CYP's broader life contexts (O'Grady, 2017).

This process not only supports the shift in staff attributions but also encourages CYP to explicitly reflect on what matters most to them, clarify their goals, and explore various possible pathways forward to achieve them (Sanderson, 2000). These approaches have been successfully applied in alternative educational contexts (Bristow, 2013), and there is evidence to suggest that Educational Psychologists (EPs) have successfully implemented person-centred planning in Youth Offending Teams (YOTs; Palmer, 2021). Further research into the application of person-centred planning in YOIs would be valuable to assess its impact and refine the approach to better meet the needs of CYP in custody.

Implications for educational psychologists. Educational Psychologists (EPs) have a key role to play in building the capacity for hope within educational settings in YOIs by supporting and empowering educational professionals.

This can be achieved by sharing their psychological expertise. For example, EPs have the knowledge to support educational professionals to effectively implement trauma-informed approaches such as PACE, relational, and person-centred planning approaches. In YOTs, EPs share knowledge through modelling best practices (Gumbs, 2023) an approach that can also be applied in YOIs. For example, by modelling person-centred planning approaches with staff teams, EPs can provide a first-hand experience of how these approaches foster hope and build capacity. This experiential learning enables staff to recognise the value of these strategies and feel more confident using them to support CYP they work with.

Furthermore, EPs can provide reflective supervision for educational professionals working in YOIs, an approach that has been implemented in the youth offending service (Beal et al., 2017). Staff in these settings operate under significant stress; for example, they are routinely exposed to details of offences and may witness behaviours that reinforce negative attributions about the CYP they support. Educational professionals need protected time and space to reflect, in order to shift underlying mindsets and build relational understanding. Through ongoing supervision, EPs can support staff in exploring unconscious biases and emotional responses that can influence their practice. Embedding these reflective practices could contribute to a shift in culture creating a more relational, person-centred environment, one that supports CYP to see themselves, and be seen, as capable of positive change. Evidence from work in the wider youth justice (Gumbs, 2023) shows that this kind of systemic work has already enabled EPs to influence organisational culture.

Through supervision, EPs could also play a vital role in supporting the implementation of policy and frameworks in practice. Many of the recommendations in this paper align with the ‘Child First’ approach that is already in use in YOIs. For example, it is a child-centred, strengths-based approach that prioritises relational connection and the development of a positive, pro-social identity. However,

the ‘Child First’ approach is not consistently implemented across all settings (Case et al., 2024) and existing guidance has been criticised for not effecting meaningful change in practice (Palmer, 2021). In the context of education within YOIs, EPs could support the effective implementation of the 'Child First' approach or other such approaches by applying tools such as implementation frameworks (Chidley & and Stringer, 2020), bridging the gap between policy and practice.

Although EPs do not currently play a prominent role in YOIs, supporting education in these settings falls within their professional remit (D’Arcy et al., 2025; Hill, 2013). Further research is needed to better understand the potential scope and impact of their contribution in YOIs.

3.5.2 Strengths and limitations

The data collection and analysis methods are a key strength of this study, enabling a rich and in-depth exploration of CYP’s perspectives. It is a particular strength that the research amplifies the voices of CYP, who are especially vulnerable because of their age, intersecting identities, and restricted sense of freedom. The use of rapport-building sessions and child-friendly materials to support informed consent and engagement in interviews aligns with best practice guidance for working with this population (Shafi, 2020). By prioritising relational and ethical sensitivity throughout the research process, the researcher was able to obtain meaningful insights.

One limitation of this study was the exclusion of 15-year-olds due to difficulties obtaining parental consent. While they make up a small proportion of the YOI population, their absence means the study may not reflect the range of experiences present across the broader population, particularly those who are the youngest and potentially most vulnerable. Additionally, the YOI acted as a gatekeeper and some CYP were excluded on the basis of identified risk factors. Security protocols also occasionally disrupted data collection, with staff requesting interviews be paused or terminated in response to operational demands. Finally, while research suggests that participatory methods are most collaborative and ethically appropriate when researching this population (Case et al., 2024), such methods could not be employed due to time constraints.

Despite these limitations, this study demonstrates how relational, ethical, and developmentally appropriate methods effectively elicited rich, meaningful data from a marginalised group. Future research could build on this foundation by adopting participatory approaches to further explore CYP's perspectives within the context of YOIs.

3.5.3 Conclusions

This study highlights CYP's educational experiences within a YOI, revealing how education can be both a source of hope and a reminder of restriction. By focusing on their voices, the research offers an understanding of what makes education meaningful in this context: relationships that enable CYP to believe they can succeed, identify pathways to achieve their goals, develop the skills they need and ultimately feel hopeful about their future.

These findings reinforce the need for more relational, personalised, and psychologically informed approaches to education in YOIs, which treat CYP as whole individuals rather than risk categories. The insights offered by this study can inform future research and prompt professionals and policymakers to reimagine education in custodial settings as a space where hope, identity, and potential can be actively nurtured.

Appendix A

Adapted CASP Checklist

Question	Response (Y/N/S/CT)	Comments
Was there a clear statement of the aims of the research?		
Is a qualitative methodology appropriate?		
Was the research design appropriate to address the aims of the research?		
Are the study's theoretical underpinnings clear, consistent and conceptually coherent?		
Was the recruitment strategy appropriate to the aims of the research?		
Was the data collected in a way that addressed the research issue?		
Has the relationship between researcher and participants been adequately considered?		
Have ethical issues been taken into consideration?		
Was the data analysis sufficiently rigorous?		
Is there a clear statement of findings?		
How valuable is the research?		

Appendix B

Data Extraction Table

Study ID	Author & date	Country	Site setting for data collection	Research aim(s)	Sampling approach	Participant details	Data collection	Data analysis
1	(Alnajdawi, 2013)	Jordan	Three residential care institutions (RCIs).	To identify the theoretical basis of interventions used in RCIs in Jordan using the views and experiences of CYP.	Volunteer sample	N = 66 male children were interviewed N = 46 Male children participant observation fieldwork Aged 12- 17 years old.	Semi-structured interviews. Participant observation fieldwork.	Strauss (1987) three-stage model of coding. Use of the manual analysis of qualitative data text to develop themes.
2	(Arendt, 2012)	Canada	Kakau Parish Juvenile	To explore the narrative, personal	Purposive sampling	N = 6 (5 males, 1 female)	Interviews and visual ethnography	Narrative inquiry

Study ID	Author & date	Country	Site setting for data collection	Research aim(s)	Sampling approach	Participant details	Data collection	Data analysis
			Detention Facilities.	histories of incarcerated juveniles.		Aged 13 – 16 years old.		
3	(Little, 2015)	UK	A young offender's institution	To find out what the children's experiences of education in a YOI were like from the children themselves	Purposive sampling	N = 75 males 'children' but specific age not clear	A questionnaire, discussion group and one-to-one interviews	Unclear
4	(Moore, 2000)	USA	A youth facility (medium risk)	How does the relationship between identity and membership in the learning community of a	Purposive sampling	N = 6 males Aged 14 – 18 years old	Ethnographic, participant observation, interviews, focus groups	Coding based on conceptual categories defined by research model. Triangulation.

Study ID	Author & date	Country	Site setting for data collection	Research aim(s)	Sampling approach	Participant details	Data collection	Data analysis
				juvenile correctional facility impact the realisation of educational goals?				
5	(Nagamuthu et al., 2019)	Malaysia	Integrity school	To explore the learning experiences of CYP in an integrity school.	Purposive sampling	N = 2, 18-year-old males	Semi-structured interviews	Narrative approach
6	(Octigan, 2018)	UK	Secure children's home	How do three people detained or placed in custody experience education	Purposive sampling	N = 3 males 15 – 16 years old	Unstructured interviews	Interpretative phenomenological analysis

Study ID	Author & date	Country	Site setting for data collection	Research aim(s)	Sampling approach	Participant details	Data collection	Data analysis
				within a secure children's home?				
7	(Ozdemir, 2010)	Turkey	Ankara Juvenile and Youth Closed Prison.	To examine and evaluate educational programmes given in prisons to CYP.	Unclear	N = 89 males. Aged 12 – 17 years old	Semi-structured interviews with 4 participants	Descriptive analysis
8	(Phillips, 2011)	USA	Juvenile detention centre.	How do youth experience schooling and learning in a youth detention centre?	Case sampling based on age, gender, race, potential length of stay	N = 11 (9 male, 2 female) Age is not clear.	One-to-one semi-structured interviews, fieldnotes, journal prompts, classwork, and participant ethnographic observations.	Narrative inquiry and ethnographic approach.

Study ID	Author & date	Country	Site setting for data collection	Research aim(s)	Sampling approach	Participant details	Data collection	Data analysis
9	(Reed & Wexler, 2014)	USA	Three juvenile justice facilities	What kinds of interactions with teachers and features of the classroom environment contribute to how juvenile offenders perceive the academic support they receive inside the facilities and at their usual schools in the community?	Sampling varied across sites: stratified and opportunity.	N = dependent on phase – unclear overall. Males and females. Age not reported	Interviews & focus groups.	Grounded theory approach.

Study ID	Author & date	Country	Site setting for data collection	Research aim(s)	Sampling approach	Participant details	Data collection	Data analysis
10	(Serie et al., 2023)	Belgium and the Netherlands	Three secure youth detention centres	To analyse the Good Life Model's assumptions about primary goods satisfaction and wellbeing and its effects upon treatment motivation and young offender rehabilitation.	Unclear	N = 20 males. Aged 14- 18 years old	Semi-structured interviews.	Thematic analysis.

Appendix C

Illustrative Figures for the Thematic Synthesis Process using NVivo 12

Figure D1 presents an example of the initial stage of thematic synthesis, specifically line-by-line coding to generate the 'initial codes.' This example shows extracts from the code 'Education staff are supportive'.

C1

NVivo 12 Coding Extracts used to Generate the Code 'Education Staff are Supportive'

<Files\\Alnajdawi> - § 2 references coded [0.02% Coverage]

Reference 1 - 0.01% Coverage

Without the encouragement of my supervisor, who always tells me _continue, you can do it', I would never be able to learn

<Files\\Octigan> - § 15 references coded [0.35% Coverage]

Reference 1 - 0.02% Coverage

whatever you want to be the staff in here...will help you as best as they can to like become whatever you want

<Files\\Reed & Wexler> - § 4 references coded [0.46% Coverage]

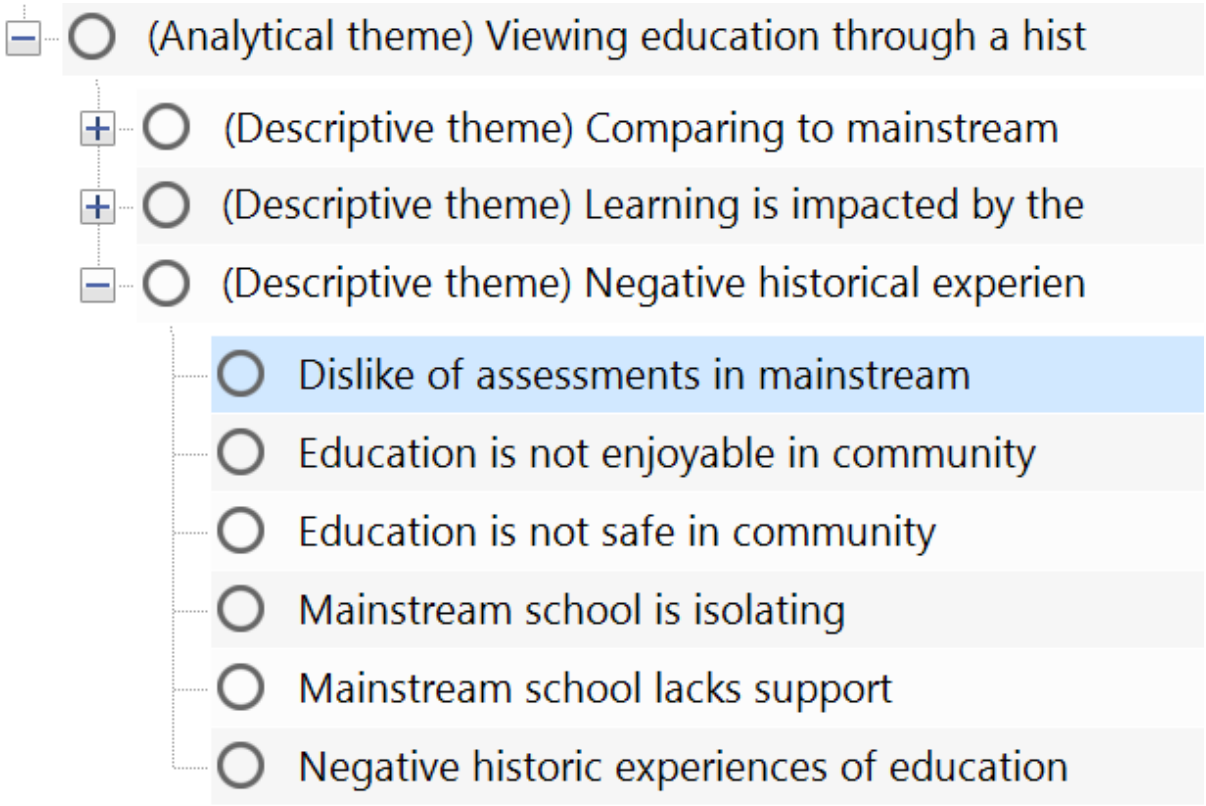
Reference 1 - 0.06% Coverage

Students at Sites 1 and 2 referred to their teachers applying positive pressure and support for learning.

Initial codes (e.g., Mainstream school is isolating, education is not safe in the community) were subsequently grouped with other codes expressing similar ideas to form 'descriptive themes.' These descriptive themes (e.g., negative historical experiences of education) were then used to derive analytical themes (e.g., Viewing education through a historical lens). Figure D2 illustrates the outcome of the three stages of the thematic synthesis process.

C2

Example of the Three-Stage Thematic Synthesis Process



Appendix D

Reflexive Log Examples

January 2024

I identified a strong interest in exploring the educational experiences of marginalised justice-involved children and young people. I initially found this focus to be somewhat broad and in need of refinement. Following preliminary scoping searches and discussions with my supervisory team, I narrowed my focus to how children and young people navigate and experience education **within** prison environments. While research has focused on the 'school to prison pipeline', there appeared to be little enquiry explicitly addressing the educational experience within prison contexts, once they had reached the end of that 'pipeline'. Although this scope remains somewhat broad, I feel I have gained great clarity and direction for my research.

June – July 2024

I have been using the 'SPIDER' framework to guide and structure my search terms. However, after exploring the literature, I initially generated an extensive and overly specific set of search terms within the SPIDER structure. When I discussed this with my supervisory team, they suggested adopting a more flexible use of SPIDER. This prompted a shift in my strategy. For instance, I now have two sets of key terms for the 'sample' element instead of just one. These cover both children (e.g., young) and their offending labels (e.g., offender) rather than listing numerous region-specific terms such as 'young offender'. This adjustment yielded more papers, allowing me to capture a broader range of views and experiences. I have also considered omitting some SPIDER categories, such as research type and design terms. However, after systematically testing this approach, I found that it broadened the yield of studies to an unmanageable extent and returned a substantial number of irrelevant results. I will continue to use SPIDER with flexibility.

September 2024

I am increasingly recognising the nuanced and varied nature of prison settings across the world. Initially, I naively assumed that justice systems would be relatively uniform, with similar types of establishments, educational provisions, and reasons for child incarceration. However, this assumption has proven to be far from accurate, and I have gained significant insight into how criminal justice systems function differently across various countries. To better reflect these distinctions, I have used the term 'prison and secure settings.' This change necessitates an important clarification within my inclusion and exclusion criteria. Specifically, I have decided to exclude children placed in such settings under welfare orders, as their deprivation of liberty differs fundamentally from that imposed through justice system processes. This distinction ensures a more transparent and more focused scope for my research.

October – November 2024

While engaging in the coding process, I stayed very close to the data, which resulted in many codes. Initially, I focused on capturing the data as accurately as possible, but over time, I began to note down some early interpretations. Although these interpretations were broad, they proved helpful when I started developing analytical themes. For instance, I identified overarching concepts such as hope, power, choice and trauma – ideas that became central to my subsequent analysis.

I coded both author interpretations and participant quotes, as I felt this dual approach could offer valuable insights into the children's and young people's experiences. Some of the interpretations made by the authors particularly resonated with me. For instance, I noticed that many of them highlighted the sense of power that children were both commenting on and experiencing, and they were experiencing it as researchers. This was especially salient because it mirrored something I was also encountering in my own experiences within the prison setting as a researcher (I have been collecting data in prison this month).

December 2024

I am currently in the process of refining my analytical themes, which has been a time-intensive task. One theme I identified relatively effortlessly focuses on 'viewing education through a historical lens'.

This may be attributed to my familiarity with the educational trajectories of children and young people in prison and secure settings, as well as the challenges they face prior to incarceration. My experience as a Trainee Educational Psychologist has provided me with valuable insights into the educational barriers encountered by these youth, along with the systematic factors that shape their learning environment, which perhaps influenced the development of this theme.

I was struck by the recurring sense of hope evident across all 11 papers, which was somewhat surprising for me. Having previously worked in a young offenders' institution, I know first-hand how challenging that environment can be. I do not naturally associate hope with such spaces, yet the children's perspectives suggest resilience and optimism. One of the themes captures this tension – hope in the face of challenges. While there was an overarching sense of hope across the papers, it coexists with a sub-theme of persistent systemic challenges. This contrast resonates with my experience, where optimism often struggled against the weight of structural barriers but somehow managed to persist

Appendix E

Descriptive and Analytical Themes

Analytical Themes	Descriptive Themes	Alnajadawi (2013)	Arendt (2012)	Little (2015)	Moore (2000)	Nagamathu et al., (2019)	Octigan (2018)	Ozedemir (2010)	Phillips (2011)	Reed & Wexler (2014)	Serie et al., (2023)
Hope for the future in the face of challenge	There are strengths in education	x	X	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	
	Education in secure settings provides opportunities	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
	Education in prison can transform lives		x		x	x	x		x		x
	Transforming identity	x	x		x		x		x		

Analytical Themes	Descriptive Themes	Alnajadawi (2013)	Arendt (2012)	Little (2015)	Moore (2000)	Nagamathu et al., (2019)	Octigan (2018)	Ozedemir (2010)	Phillips (2011)	Reed & Wexler (2014)	Serie et al., (2023)
Subtheme one: The transformative power of relationships	Positive teacher relationships	x		x	x		x		x	x	
	Positive peer relationships				x	x	x		x	x	
Subtheme two: Barriers to achieving goals	Systemic barriers	x		x					x	x	
	The curriculum isn't tailored to needs	x	x	x	x			x	x	x	
	Individual barriers			x			x				
	Lack of resources		x	x	x	x					

Analytical Themes	Descriptive Themes	Alnajadawi (2013)	Arendt (2012)	Little (2015)	Moore (2000)	Nagamathu et al., (2019)	Octigan (2018)	Ozedemir (2010)	Phillips (2011)	Reed & Wexler (2014)	Serie et al., (2023)
	Goals don't feel achievable or supported	x	x	x	x			x	x	x	
Viewing education through a historical lens	Comparing education to mainstream		x		x		x		x	x	
	Negative historical experiences	x		x			x		x		
	Learning is impacted by the past		x				x		x		
Navigating learner and offender identities	Learner identities				x		x		x		
	Responses to judgement	x			x		x		x		

Analytical Themes	Descriptive Themes	Alnajadawi (2013)	Arendt (2012)	Little (2015)	Moore (2000)	Nagamathu et al., (2019)	Octigan (2018)	Ozedemir (2010)	Phillips (2011)	Reed & Wexler (2014)	Serie et al., (2023)
	Viewed as offenders	x	x	x	x	x	x		x	x	
	Marginalisation in educational spaces	x	x		x						
	Forced independence and isolation in learning		x	x	x	x	x			x	
Navigating control and power in educational spaces	Students are controlled	x	x		x		x		x		
	Relational power dynamics		x	x	x	x	x		x		
	Choice	x		x		x	x		x	x	

Analytical Themes	Descriptive Themes	Alnajadawi (2013)	Arendt (2012)	Little (2015)	Moore (2000)	Nagamathu et al., (2019)	Octigan (2018)	Ozedemir (2010)	Phillips (2011)	Reed & Wexler (2014)	Serie et al., (2023)
	Rewards and sanctions		x	x	x	x	x		x	x	
	Negative relationships	x	x		x		x		x	x	

Appendix F

Reflexive Log examples

September 2023

I took a significant amount of time deliberating what topic I should focus on for my thesis. I have decided to focus on children and young people's experience of education in prison and secure settings.

Why Have I Chosen this Topic?

- Strong interest in education, shaped by my experience as a Trainee Educational Psychologist and previous experience as a qualified teacher
- Direct experience working in a Young Offender Institute, where I recognised this group of children and young people as particularly vulnerable and marginalised. I became aware of the significant disruptions to their educational journeys and the complexity of their learning needs.
- Commitment to social justice and a desire to advocate for the voices of children and young people who are often unheard.

December 2024

I reflected on my own power and privilege when planning the methodology (e.g., liberty as someone not incarcerated, white, educated). These aspects of my identity shape the research dynamic and may influence how participants perceive me and engage with the study. Acknowledging this, I aimed to reduce the power imbalance and foster a sense of trust.

To support this, I planned several strategies:

- Face-to-face information sessions where participants could meet me and ask questions about the study

- Posting consent forms and information sheets under children and young people's doors **after** these sessions, to give them time to think about whether they want to consent to the project
- Rapport-building sessions before interviews
- Ensuring participants were aware of their rights (outlined in the consent form/information sheet) each time I met them

July 2024

At this stage of the research process, I am experiencing feelings of frustration and helplessness due to repeated delays in receiving ethical approval. These delays are beyond my control, yet they have a significant impact on the research timeline, as I am scheduled to start research this month.

However, this experience has deepened my understanding of the structural complexities involved in researching within the criminal justice system. While the delays are challenging, I recognise the ethics process is in place to protect participants, many of whom are vulnerable.

November 2024

Overall Reflections on the First Few Days of Data Collection:

Data collection has been emotionally demanding. I have noted some of the feelings I have experienced over the last few days:

- Mixed emotions about being in a YOI again (years later) – a lot has changed, but also not as much as I had hoped, which I feel disappointed about.
- I find myself often making comparisons to when I worked in a YOI (I note these as they arise) – a reminder of how my previous life experiences impact the research
- I feel like I am seeing education in the YOI for the first time – is this because, since I have worked here, I have qualified as a teacher and am training as an EP? These roles frame what education *could* and *should* be and likely influence the expectations I bring.

- It's challenging to access participants – I feel frustrated over the lack of control that I have. This feeling has made me reflect on power structures in the YOI for the children and young people, but also for researchers.
- I feel surprised by the hope that participants express in the interviews – what does this say about my views on education in a YOI? Have I internalised a negative belief about education in YOIs? Their optimism challenges me to reconsider what is possible in these settings. These children and young people, their resilience, inspire me.

February 2025

Example of initial notes during transcription:

Initial notes	Researcher's thoughts/feelings
• Feels like he has moved beyond education. Age-appropriate education?	• Surprised – challenged my belief about the importance of education?
• Personal responsibility to get education – intrinsic motivation? Self-reliance? Agency?	• Desire to want to help – you don't have to do it on your own.
• Not a "good kid"	• Sadness that he has internalised this belief
• Disengaged when discussing ideal school. Deserving of what he has got – not the ideal? Accepting of past behaviour? Cannot see beyond reality?	• Initially frustrated in the interview as not able to answer the questions. Found it hard to understand that the ideal is not even imaginable
	• I reframed "playground" in the interview as an "outdoor space" when he didn't respond to it. Does this reflect my beliefs

	about their age/development? Or is it because the participant has highlighted that he is beyond the age of education? I didn't notice this during the interview – only now that I am listening again.

March 2025

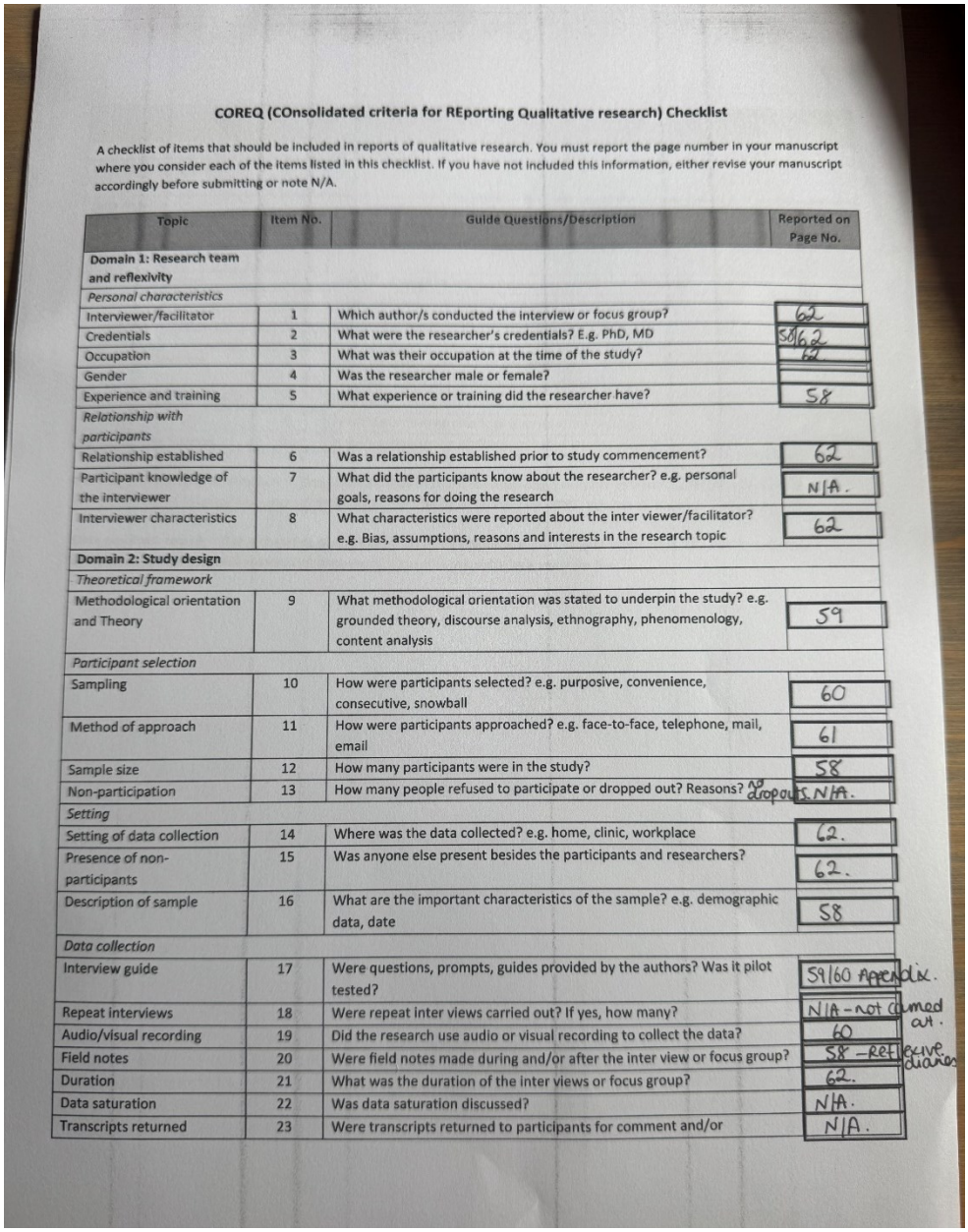
Developing Group Experiential Themes

Moving from personal experiential themes to group experiential themes has been challenging. I've spent so much time with each participant's data I feel like I know them individually, and I am emotionally invested in their stories. As a result, I feel a strong responsibility to honour their experiences. As I begin to identify patterns across participants, I'm aware of resistance within myself; I worry that in seeking out commonalities, I might unintentionally overlook nuances and richness. This made me reflect on the importance of not only identifying shared experiences but also differences.

I created some initial themes, but they felt fragmented, more like a collection of separate 'parts'. This prompted me to return to the hermeneutic cycle, revisiting the data to consider how the 'whole' could illuminate the 'parts', and vice versa. Through this process, I began to think more deeply about how the themes relate to one another and to the overall lived experiences of the participants. This iterative movement helped me to refine the themes.

Appendix G

COREQ Checklist



COREQ (COnsolidated criteria for REporting Qualitative research) Checklist

A checklist of items that should be included in reports of qualitative research. You must report the page number in your manuscript where you consider each of the items listed in this checklist. If you have not included this information, either revise your manuscript accordingly before submitting or note N/A.

Topic	Item No.	Guide Questions/Description	Reported on Page No.
Domain 1: Research team and reflexivity			
Personal characteristics			
Interviewer/facilitator	1	Which author/s conducted the interview or focus group?	62
Credentials	2	What were the researcher's credentials? E.g. PhD, MD	58/62
Occupation	3	What was their occupation at the time of the study?	62
Gender	4	Was the researcher male or female?	
Experience and training	5	What experience or training did the researcher have?	58
Relationship with participants			
Relationship established	6	Was a relationship established prior to study commencement?	62
Participant knowledge of the interviewer	7	What did the participants know about the researcher? e.g. personal goals, reasons for doing the research	N/A.
Interviewer characteristics	8	What characteristics were reported about the inter viewer/facilitator? e.g. Bias, assumptions, reasons and interests in the research topic	62
Domain 2: Study design			
Theoretical framework			
Methodological orientation and Theory	9	What methodological orientation was stated to underpin the study? e.g. grounded theory, discourse analysis, ethnography, phenomenology, content analysis	59
Participant selection			
Sampling	10	How were participants selected? e.g. purposive, convenience, consecutive, snowball	60
Method of approach	11	How were participants approached? e.g. face-to-face, telephone, mail, email	61
Sample size	12	How many participants were in the study?	58
Non-participation	13	How many people refused to participate or dropped out? Reasons?	No dropouts. N/A.
Setting			
Setting of data collection	14	Where was the data collected? e.g. home, clinic, workplace	62.
Presence of non-participants	15	Was anyone else present besides the participants and researchers?	62.
Description of sample	16	What are the important characteristics of the sample? e.g. demographic data, date	58
Data collection			
Interview guide	17	Were questions, prompts, guides provided by the authors? Was it pilot tested?	59/60 Appendix.
Repeat interviews	18	Were repeat inter views carried out? If yes, how many?	N/A - not carried out.
Audio/visual recording	19	Did the research use audio or visual recording to collect the data?	60
Field notes	20	Were field notes made during and/or after the inter view or focus group?	58 - Reflective diaries
Duration	21	What was the duration of the inter views or focus group?	62.
Data saturation	22	Was data saturation discussed?	N/A.
Transcripts returned	23	Were transcripts returned to participants for comment and/or	N/A.

Topic	Item No.	Guide Questions/Description	Reported on Page No.
		correction?	
Domain 3: analysis and findings			
Data analysis			
Number of data coders	24	How many data coders coded the data?	63
Description of the coding tree	25	Did authors provide a description of the coding tree?	63-Appendix.
Derivation of themes	26	Were themes identified in advance or derived from the data?	63
Software	27	What software, if applicable, was used to manage the data?	N/A.
Participant checking	28	Did participants provide feedback on the findings?	N/A.
Reporting			
Quotations presented	29	Were participant quotations presented to illustrate the themes/findings? Was each quotation identified? e.g. participant number	Yes-66-80.
Data and findings consistent	30	Was there consistency between the data presented and the findings?	Yes-66-80.
Clarity of major themes	31	Were major themes clearly presented in the findings?	65.
Clarity of minor themes	32	Is there a description of diverse cases or discussion of minor themes?	N/A.

Developed from: Tong A, Sainsbury P, Craig J. Consolidated criteria for reporting qualitative research (COREQ): a 32-item checklist for interviews and focus groups. *International Journal for Quality in Health Care*. 2007. Volume 19, Number 6: pp. 349 – 357

Once you have completed this checklist, please save a copy and upload it as part of your submission. DO NOT include this checklist as part of the main manuscript document. It must be uploaded as a separate file.

Appendix H

Interview Topic Guide

I want to learn about what would make a meaningful education for children and young people in young offenders' institutes. I will ask you about your educational experiences and hopes for the future. Keeping these topics in mind, I will ask you to discuss and draw (if you like!) different areas of an ideal school.

Reminders:

- There is no right or wrong way to do this.
- It doesn't matter what your drawings look like.
- There will be breaks if needed.

School of Good Things

Tell me about or draw anything positive about your educational experiences.

Discussion points:

- School provision (past/present)
- Environment
- Learning task
- Individuals within education
- Thoughts/feelings

School of worries

"Tell me about or draw any challenges or difficult experiences you have had in education"

Discussion points:

- School provision (past/present)
- Environment
- Learning task
- Individuals within education
- Thoughts/feelings

School of Hopes

Tell me about or draw your hopes and dreams for the future.

Discussion points:

- Goals
- Education
- Work

Appendix I

Child Friendly Participant Information Sheets

Participant Information Sheet

Study Title: How can we make education meaningful and engaging for young people in young offenders' Institutes?

Researcher: Alana Gallacher

ERGO number: 90977 **IRAS number:** 340813

Hello, my name is Alana Gallacher. I am a Trainee Educational Psychologist at the University of Southampton. I work with children and young people to make their education the best it can be.

You are being invited to take part in a research study.

To help you decide whether you would like to take part or not, please read the information below carefully and ask questions if anything is not clear.

Please feel free to discuss it with others, but it is up to you to decide whether or not to take part.

If you are happy to take part you will be asked to sign a consent form.

What is the research about?

Education provides young people with opportunities to learn skills and get qualifications for their future. At the moment, studies show that education in custody is not meaningful or engaging for young people.

I will ask you about:

- Your educational experiences
- Your future goals
- What makes a meaningful education for you

Questions you might have:

Why have I been asked to take part?

All young people aged 16 and above, who are sentenced, on the A-side of the YOI have been invited to take part.

Depending on how many people would like to take part, we might not need to talk to everyone. If we have too many volunteers, we will **randomly** pick who is going to be involved. If you do not hear from us by 31/12/24 it means that you were not picked to be involved in the study and your consent form will be destroyed.

What will happen to me if I take part?

You will take part in two sessions with me.
These sessions will either be on the same day or as close to each other as possible (e.g. in the same week)

The first session will take around 20 minutes.

We will have a chat and play some games so that we can get to know each other.

The second session will take up to 60 minutes.

I will ask you to talk about your educational experiences, your goals for the future, and what would make a meaningful education for you.

We may draw some pictures whilst we talk about this (if you want to!).

This session will be audio (voice) recorded so that I can create a written version of all the information you tell me.

Our conversation will remain confidential (private) unless you say anything that tells us you or someone else might be in danger, in which case I will tell Ellena Cooke in the YOI so that we can keep everyone safe, as all staff do in a YOI.

Are there any benefits in my taking part?

By taking part will give you a chance to share your opinions and ideas on what would make education in YOIs better.

Are there any risks involved?

For some people, talking about their previous educational experiences might be upsetting or stressful.

- If you need to take a break at any point or need support during the session, please let me know.
- If you feel worried after the session, please let me know and/or speak to a member of staff.

It is your choice to take part in this study.
You can change your mind before, during the interview, or even after the interview if you feel unhappy.
Just let me know if you do not want to be part of the study anymore.

What information will be collected?

I will collect data about you from the YOI, this will include your age, gender, ethnicity, and IEP level.

During our second session, I will use a voice recording to record our conversation.
I will listen to this recording afterward and create a written version of everything we say.
Once I have written it down, I will delete the voice recording.

If you are chosen to take part, I will make a digital copy of the form you sign saying you would like to take part.
I will only take a digital copy of your form if you are chosen to take part.
All paper copies of these forms will be shredded.

All of this information will be stored securely on the computer system at my university – meaning that it can only be accessed by people who are allowed to access it.

Will my participation be confidential?

Confidentiality is about keeping your information private. The fact that you are part of this study, will be kept confidential.

Any information you tell me during the sessions will also be confidential (unless it could bring harm to you or someone else)

The only people who will have access to the information are:

- Myself (Alana)
- Staff at the university who are helping me.
- Staff at the university who check that I am running the study properly.
- Individuals from regulatory authorities (people who check that we are carrying out the study correctly)

All of these people have must keep your information strictly confidential, so they cannot tell anyone else.

I will make any information you give anonymous, so it is not linked to you. I will remove your name and use a pseudonym (a fake name) instead. I will also use pseudonyms for any people or places you mention. This means that nobody else will know that the information has come from you.

The anonymised information (the information with fake names), including the things you told me, will be included in the final version of my research.

In the report, I will use some of the exact things you said (quotes), but no one will be able to tell that you said it.

This final report will be made available on the Internet.

Do I have to take part?

No, it is up to you to decide whether or not to take part.
If you decide you want to take part, you will need to sign a consent form to show you have agreed to take part.

If you need any support- whether you want to take part or not- please speak to YOI staff and/or the Wellbeing Team.

What happens if I change my mind?

If you want to stop being part of the study before, during or after our session you can. You don't have to give a reason. You can ask a member of YOI staff to email: Alana Gallacher (ag25g11@soton.ac.uk).

Once the written record of our conversation is finished, I will not be able to withdraw your information, because the information will be anonymised and you will no longer be identifiable.

What will happen to the results of the research?

A summary of the project will be sent to the YOI. A report will be made and read by university staff, and later made available on the internet. The report might be later published as an article in a journal.

Your personal details will NOT be included in anyway. No-one will know that you were part of the study.

Where can I get more information?

To get more information, please contact Alana Gallacher (ag25g11@soton.ac.uk) or Ellena Cooke in The Wellbeing Team.

What happens if there is a problem?

If you are unhappy about something in the study and you are still unhappy after speaking to Alana, you can make a formal complaint.
Please contact the Head of Research Integrity and Governance, University of Southampton:

- E-mail- rgoinfo@soton.ac.uk,
- Phone number- + 44 2380 595058.

You will need to tell them the Ethics/ERGO number (top of this form).

This next bit is our Data Protection and Privacy notice. We legally have to include this section. Please read through it but do ask staff if you have any questions about it.

University of Southampton Data Protection Privacy Notice

How will we use the information about you?

The University of Southampton and the Ministry of Justice are the 'Data Controllers' for this study, which means that we are **responsible for looking after your information** and using it properly. Following data protection laws, guidance and policies help us to do this.

We will need information from **you** and from the **young offenders' institute** for this research project.

This Participant Information Sheet tells you **what data will be collected for this project**, and whether this includes any 'personal data' – this means anything that identifies, or is directly about you. Please ask the research team if you have any questions about what data is being collected about you.

We will keep your information **safe** and **secure**.

I will make any information you give anonymous, so it is not linked to you. I will remove your name and use a pseudonym (a fake name) instead. I will also use pseudonyms for any people or places you mention. This means that nobody else will know that the information has come from you.

Once we have finished the study, we will keep some of the information so we can check the results. We will write our reports in a way that no-one can work out that you took part in the study.

What are your choices about how your information is used?

- If you want to stop being part of the study before, during or after our session you can. Once the written record of our conversation is finished, I will not be able to withdraw your information, because your responses will be anonymised and you will no longer be identifiable.

- We need to look after your information and make sure the research is reliable. This means that after you have given it to us and it has been processed, neither we or you will be able to look up and change anything about it.

Where can you find out more about how your information is used?

You can find out more about how we use your information:

- by sending an email to University's Data Protection Officer (data.protection@soton.ac.uk).

- by asking one of the research team
- by reading our general privacy policy.
- by sending an email to Alana (ag25g11@soton.ac.uk).

How long does the university keep your information?

- The University of Southampton will keep identifiable information about you for 10 years after the study has finished after which time any link between you and your information will be removed.

If you are happy to take part, please complete the attached consent form.

Once these are completed, put the form back in the envelope, seal it and return them to a member of prison staff.

Appendix J

Consent Form

CONSENT FORM

Study Title: How can we make education meaningful and engaging for young people in young offenders Institutes?

Ethics/ERGO number: 90977 **IRAS number:** 340813

Version and date: V5 19.08.24

Thank you for your interest in this study.

It is very important to us to conduct our studies in line with ethics principles, and this Consent Form asks you to confirm if you agree to take part in the above study.

Please carefully consider the statements below and add your initials and signature only if you agree to participate in this research and understand what this will mean for you.

Please add your initials to the boxes below if you agree with the statements:

Mandatory Consent Statements	**Participant Initials**
I confirm that I read the Participant Information Sheet version 5, dated 19.08.2024 explaining the study above and I understand what is expected of me.	
I was given the opportunity to consider the information, ask questions about the study, and all my questions have been answered to my satisfaction.	
I agree to take part in this study and understand that data collected during this research project will be used for the purpose of this study.	
I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw from this study at any time without giving a reason.	

Additional Statements - please add your initials in the boxes below you to agree to:

Additional Consent Statements (if relevant to your study)	**Participant Initials**
I understand that taking part in this study involves audio recording. I am happy for my interview to be audio recorded and understand that the audio recording will be deleted immediately once transcription is completed.	
I understand that the anonymised transcripts will be deposited in the University of Southampton Data Repository so it can be used for future research and learning.	
I understand that if I withdraw from the study, it may not be possible to remove my data once my personal information is no longer linked to the study data. I understand that I can withdraw my data from the use in this study up until the point of transcription.	
I understand that all personal information collected about me (e.g., my name and contact details) will be kept confidential (i.e., will not be shared beyond the study team) unless required by law or relevant regulations (e.g., for the purpose of monitoring the safety of this study).	

CONSENT FORM

Study Title: How can we make education meaningful and engaging for young people in young offenders Institutes?

Ethics/ERGO number: 90977 **IRAS number:** 340813

Version and date: V5 19.08.24

Thank you for your interest in this study.

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I was given the opportunity to consider the information, ask questions about the study, and all my questions have been answered to my satisfaction.	
I agree to take part in this study and understand that data collected during this research project will be used for the purpose of this study.	
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Additional Statements - please add your initials in the boxes below you to agree to:

Additional Consent Statements (if relevant to your study)	Participant Initials
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I understand that the anonymised transcripts will be deposited in the University of Southampton Data Repository so it can be used for future research and learning.	
I understand that if I withdraw from the study, it may not be possible to remove my data once my personal information is no longer linked to the study data. I understand that I can withdraw my data from the use in this study up until the point of transcription.	
I understand that all personal information collected about me (e.g., my name and contact details) will be kept confidential (i.e., will not be shared beyond the study team) unless required by law or relevant regulations (e.g., for the purpose of monitoring the safety of this study).	

Name of participant	Signature	Date
Name of person taking consent	Signature	Date

*Once this Consent Form has been signed by all parties, a copy of the signed and dated form should be provided to the study participant. Original signed copy should be stored in the study site file (If applicable).

Appendix K

Debrief Form

Debriefing Form

Study Title: How can we make education meaningful and engaging for young people in young offenders Institutes?

Ethics/ERGO number: 90977 **IRAS number:** 340813

Researcher(s): Alana Gallacher

University email(s): ag25g11@soton.ac.uk

Version and date: V2, 24.05.2024

Thank you for taking part in my research project.

I really appreciate you taking the time to talk to me!

Purpose of the study

This is a study looking at educational experiences of children in Young Offenders' Institutes (YOIs) and how to make the learning relevant to your future goals.

Your opinions will help us understand what the education offer is like in YOIs and what could be changed.

Confidentiality.

Confidentiality is another word for privacy and means that the information will not be shared, unless necessary (e.g. because of safety).

The results from this study will be anonymous and will not identify you in any way.

I will remove a name and use a pseudonym (a fake name). I will also use pseudonyms for any people or places you mention. This means that nobody else will know that the information has come from you.

The confidential information you share (e.g., age, ethnicity, gender, IEP level, and consent forms) will be kept by the university and destroyed after 10 years- which is the law (Data Protection Act).

If you want to stop being part of the study before, during, or after our session you can. You don't have to give a reason. You can ask a member of YOI staff to email: Alana Gallacher (ag25g11@soton.ac.uk).

Study results

If you would like to see the results when they are ready, let Alana know or ask a member of staff to email her (ag25g11@soton.ac.uk).

Support

If being part of the study causes you any stress or worries, you can talk to someone about it. Ask the staff to put you in contact with:

- The Wellbeing Team
- An officer on your unit

After leaving Feltham, you can contact other organisations for support:

Novus – education provider within the YOI, and a social enterprise that supports ex-offenders to gain employment upon release from custody.

- Phone number: 03333 222 888
- https://www.novus.ac.uk/

Action for Children – A registered charity that supports young offenders both in and out of prison. This includes training and youth work.

- https://www.actionforchildren.org.uk/

St Giles Trust – A registered charity that supports prison leavers to get access to the services they need upon release from custody.

- https://www.stgilestrust.org.uk/

Young Minds – A free text service to offer support around mental health.

- https://www.youngminds.org.uk/
- Text - 85258

Further Information

If you are interested in this study, you can have a look at these documents

- A Guide to Child First

https://yjresourcehub.uk/images/YJB/Child_First_Overview_and_Guide_April_2022_YJB.pdf

- Trusting Children to Enhance Youth Justice Policy: The Importance and Value of Children's Voices https://www.rj4allpublications.com/product/trusting-children-to-enhance-youth-justice-policy-the-importance-and-value-of-childrens-voices/

I have copies of these documents with me if you would like to read them.

If you have any concerns or questions, please contact Alana Gallacher at ag25g11@soton.ac.uk

If you are unhappy about something in the study and you are still unhappy after speaking to Alana, you can make a formal complaint. Please contact the Head of Research Integrity and Governance, University of Southampton:

E-mail- rgoinfo@soton.ac.uk,

Phone number- + 44 2380 595058.

You will need to tell them the Ethics/ERGO number (top of this form).

Appendix L

Illustrative Figures for the Interpretative Phenomenological Approach Process

Step One

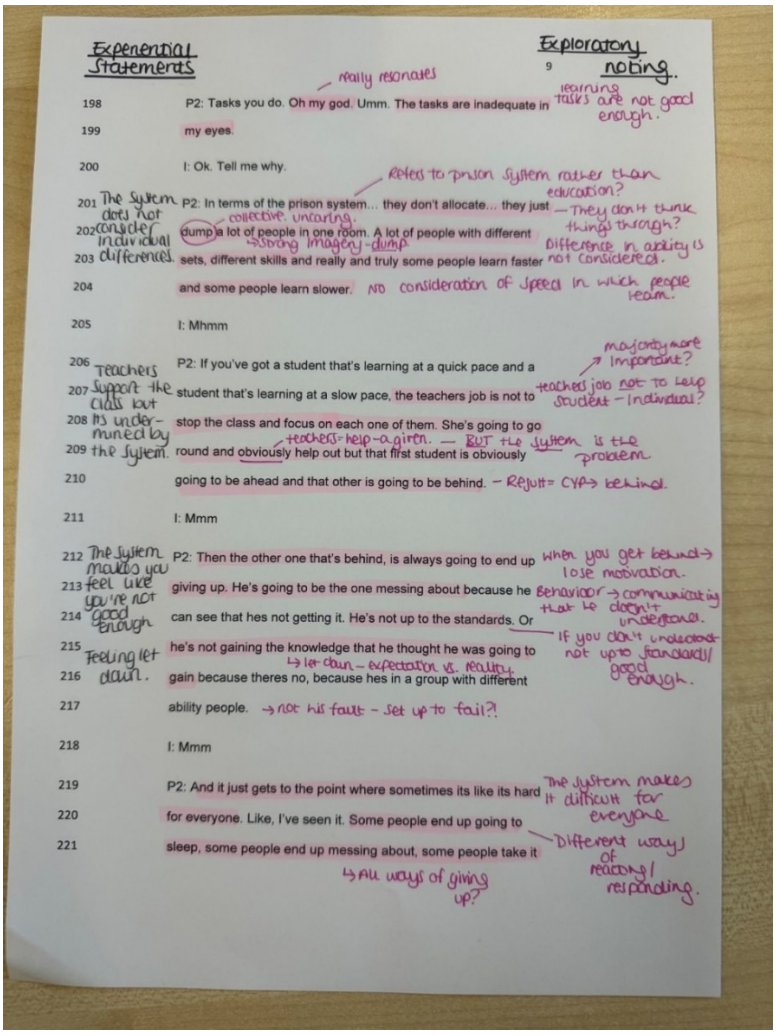
The researcher immersed themselves in the first case, listening to the audio recording while typing the interview, and reading the transcript at least twice.

Stage Two and Three of the IPA process

Figure L1 shows steps two and three of the IPA process, with exploratory noting recorded in the right-hand margin and experiential statements in the left-hand margin.

L1

Exploratory Noting and Experiential Statements

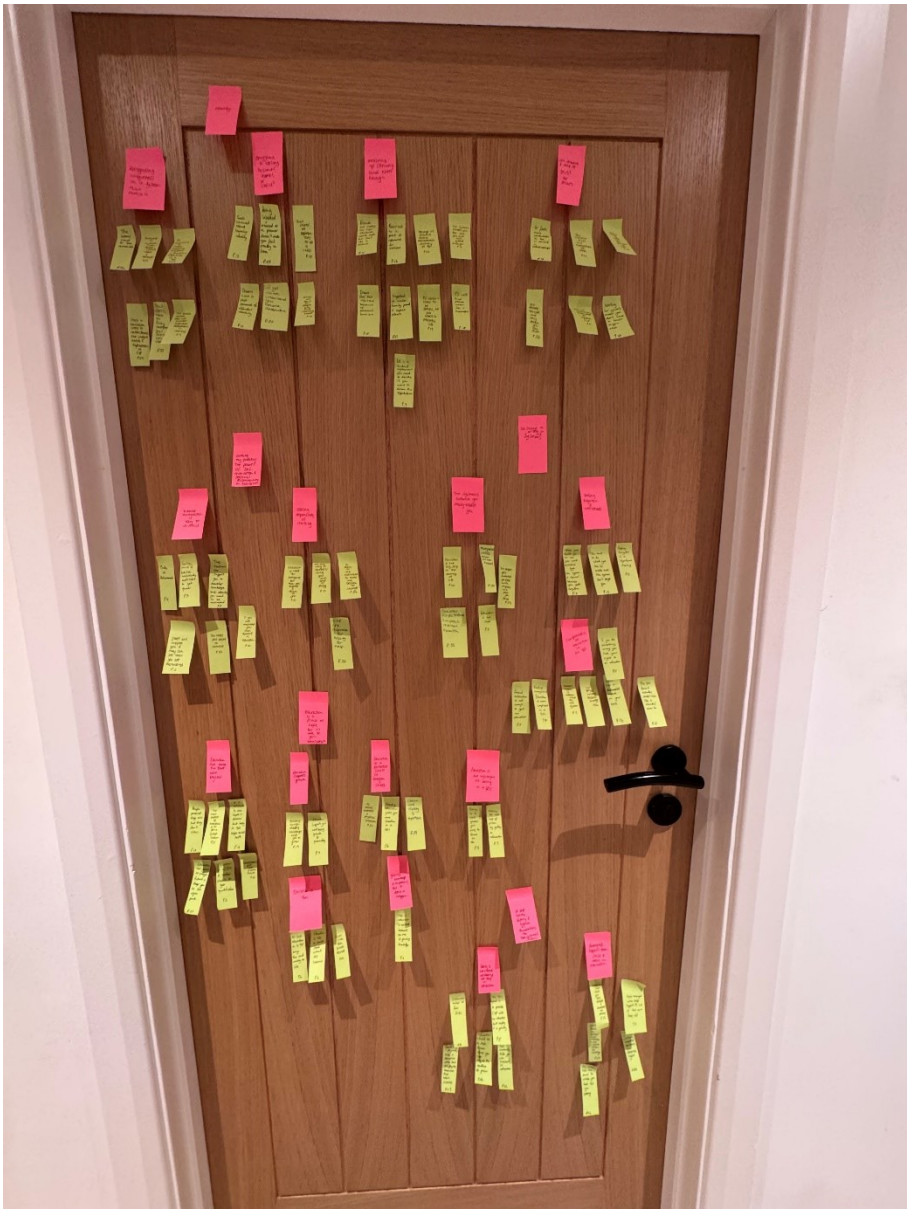


Step Four of the IPA process

Figures L2 and L3 illustrate step four of the IPA process: searching for connections across experiential statements.

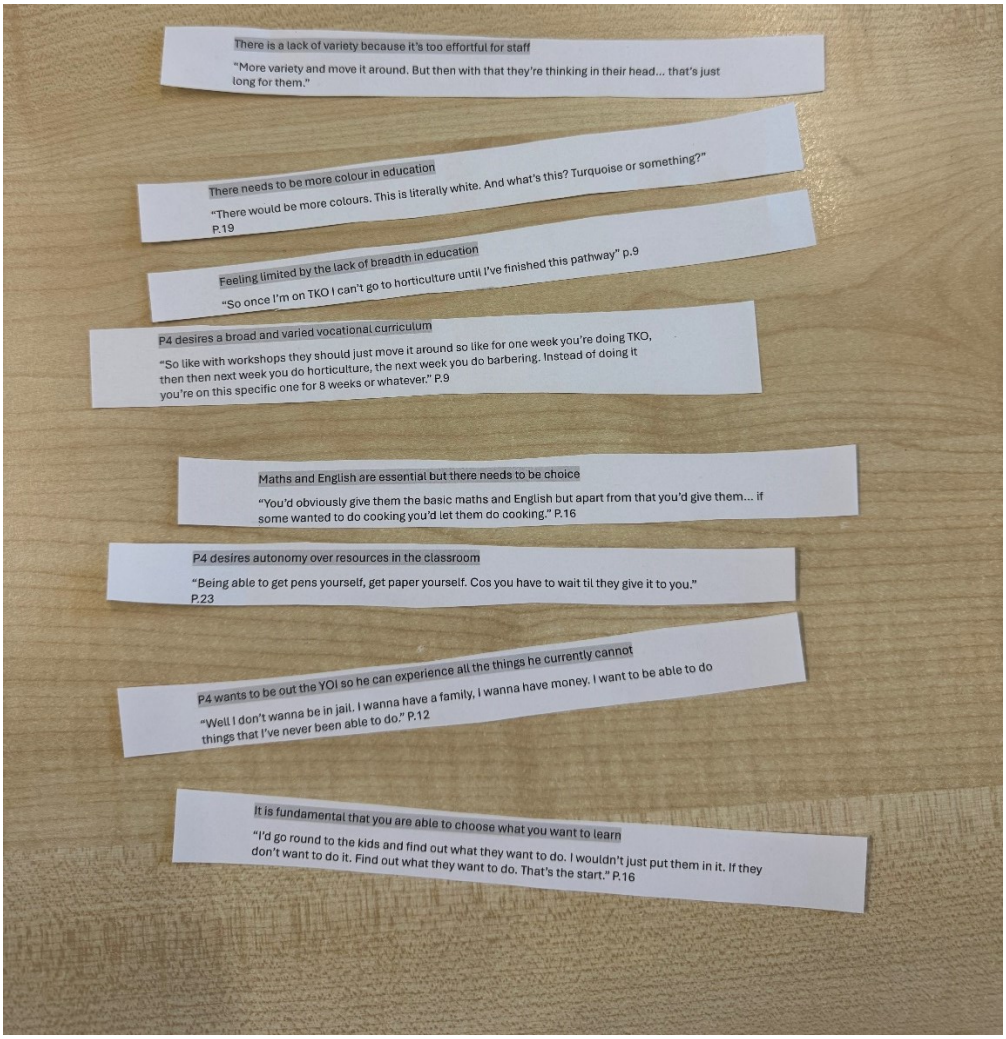
L2

Example of Searching for Connections across Experiential Statements



L3

Example of Searching for Connections across Experiential Statements



Step Five

The researcher named the personal experiential themes (PETs) and organised them into a table.

L4

Example of One of the Eight PET Tables (Elijah)

Personal Experiential Theme	Example excerpt
Navigating limited autonomy	"I feel like there's enough for everyone to like have a bit of like yeah I've been here for like a year and a bit and I haven't done anything." P8

Personal Experiential Theme	Example excerpt
	"Horticulture, I haven't done that yet. I feel like I might enjoy it, innit, but I haven't had the chance to experience it" p7 "I'd be the headteacher." P17
Education as a pathway to change	"I'm going to redo my GCSEs and pass because I didn't pass on the roads, innit." P3
The Power of teacher-student Relationships	"Most of the teachers, innit, just help us to get on the right track." P5

Step Six

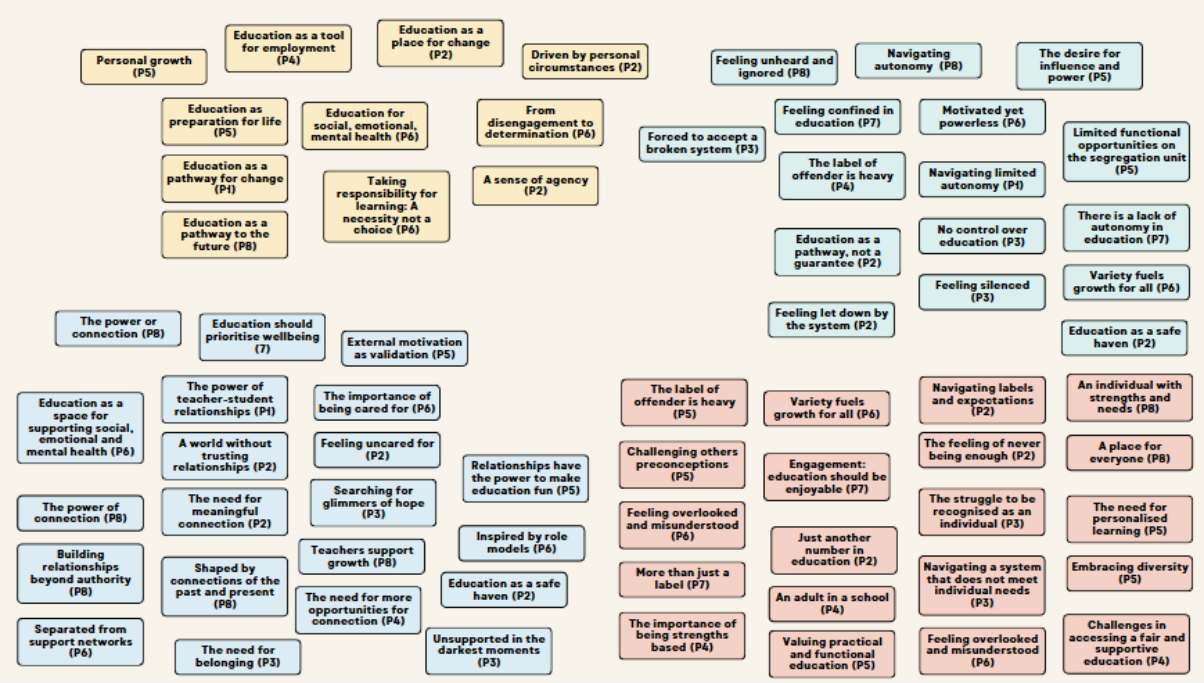
The researcher repeated the process for subsequent transcripts, applying the same steps.

Step Seven

The researcher compared PETs across transcripts, identifying similarities and differences to create group experiential themes (GETs).

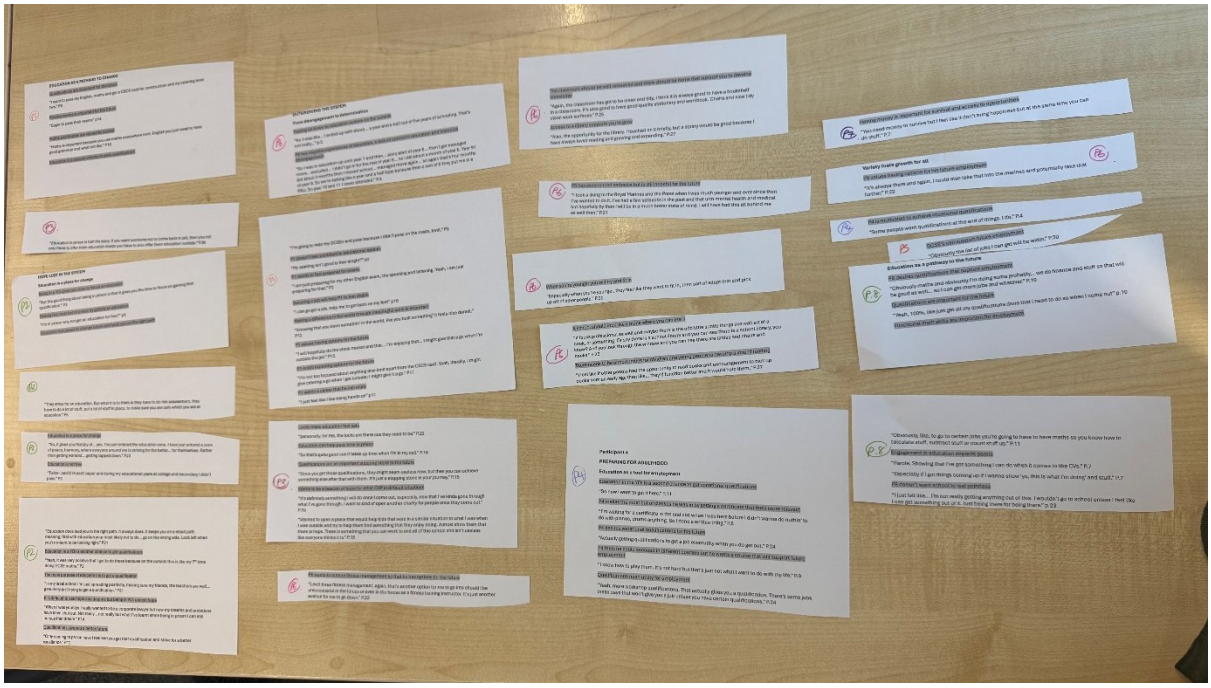
L5

An example of identifying similarities and differences to create group themes



L6

An example of identifying similarities and differences to create group themes



Appendix M

Personal Experiential Themes

M1

Personal Experiential Themes (Elijah)

Personal Experiential Theme	Example excerpt
Navigating limited autonomy	"I feel like there's enough for everyone to like have a bit of like yeah I've been here for like a year and a bit and I haven't done anything." p8 "Horticulture, I haven't done that yet. I feel like I might enjoy it, innit, but I haven't had the chance to experience it" p7 "I'd be the headteacher." p17
Education as a pathway to change	"I'm going to redo my GCSEs and pass because I didn't pass on the roads, innit." p3
The Power of teacher-student Relationships	"Most of the teachers, innit, just help us to get on the right track." p5

M2

Personal Experiential Themes (Rafiq)

Personal Experiential Theme	Subtheme (s)	Example Excerpt
The struggle for identity in a system	Navigating labels	"Getting searched… like… you're in prison so I understand it's a protocol but if you go education like you shouldn't really be… I don't want to be a prisoner… that's already corrupting my mind before I've even started learning." p23
	The feeling of never being enough	"I'm a black sheep." P12 "My friends since I've been in prison, my friends have opened their own barber shops. I've just watched everyone grow up, apart from myself. To be honest, like, it's just sad innit to see… they stuck to their one dream and ambition and look how far they've gone." p16
	Just another number in education	"They just dump a load of people in one room. A lot of people with different sets, different skills" p9
Carrying the weight of education alone	A sense of agency in education	"The teachers do try to strive for the YPs. For them to gain knowledge and what not. But at the end of the day no one can force you to learn… it's up to you if you really want to learn." p8

Personal Experiential Theme	Subtheme (s)	Example Excerpt
	A world without trusting relationships	"Whether it's because they want to up their job or get promoted, or whether they want to make you happy, this and that… it's up to them how… some people might do it out of the genuineness of their heart… I don't know. That's life." p33
	The need for meaningful connections	"It should attract you in a way that you are drawn to it straight away… like you belong there… like you want to sit down in that chair and not get up." p24
Hope lost in the system	Education as a place of change	"Only coming to prison have I realised you get that qualification and strive for a better excellence." p12
	Education as a safe haven	"I want to go to an education, to an environment that makes me feel safe and wanted and that I can see me doing good. I can see myself actually focusing, having a fresh mind and getting some work done" p22
	Feeling let down by the system	"Like you are setting up people to fail in society, in my eyes. Yeah, if you can't provide a good education, a good qualification for people to receive in here, then how can you expect them to reconcile back into society?" p34

M3

Personal Experiential Themes (Marek)

Personal Experiential Theme	Subtheme (s)	Example Excerpt
Alone	Feeling uncared for	"And there is a lot of teachers that are the opposite…. In it just for the money, or just for the experience and so they kinda don't care about anything." p23
	Unsupported in the darkest moments	"The other thing about jail is… you feel alone because you are alone and I think that is the darkest part about jail. It's the fact that not only have you had your freedom taken from you, you've got your support system taken from you, you are completely and utterly alone." p28
	The need for belonging	"Cos you are alone so much of the time… there's a community and if you feel included then almost like that sense of isolation is gone." p40
	Feeling different from peers	"In my opinion they are just followers, just sheep following some dickhead that no one even cares about his irrelevant opinion. That's why I just do my own thing and I will achieve more than they will." p17
Dehumanised in education	The struggle to be recognised as an individual	"It's almost like you are taking the humanity out of the child." P.25

Personal Experiential Theme	Subtheme (s)	Example Excerpt
	Navigating a system that does not meet individual needs	"But the way the boy thinks of it is 'I don't know how to do this. They're not helping me enough so I'm going to get pissed off and then I'm going to react." p13
Feeling powerless	No control over education	"I'm going to be shipped within a month or two and I probably won't even have time to finish all this… all the qualifications that I started." p4
	Feeling silenced	"It's kind of like you almost have to stay quiet otherwise you are punished even further than you were anyway." p41
Feeling hopeless about change	Forced to accept a broken system	"That's also why YOIs are so violent cos a lot of 18 years go in there and are mad at the system. Mad at the world. Mad at their families. Mad at their friends. Mad at police. Mad at everything. They are mad at the whole system…. For letting them down. For that reason they've got a bare anger swelling up inside them. Then they cause more trouble for the system." p31 "So, it's like the whole system that they've built is really broken, to be honest, before they even start." p12
	Searching for glimmers of hope	"Once you get those qualifications, they might seem useless now, but then you can

Personal Experiential Theme	Subtheme (s)	Example Excerpt
		achieve something else after that with them. It's just a stepping stone in your journey." p15 I want someone who has sat in a can for sixteen years and has come out and achieved something in his life and can come in and be almost like a ray of sunshine." p30

M4

Personal Experiential Themes (Sam)

Personal Experiential Theme	Subtheme (s)	Example Excerpt
Preparing for adulthood	Education as a tool for employment	"Yeah, more workshop qualifications. That actually gives you a qualification. There's some jobs these days that won't give you a job unless you have certain qualifications." p24
	An adult in a school	"Say I'm 18 yeah? I've come in and I'm doing education like, all this I've done for many years before. There's workshops and I suggested they should like, 18 year olds should have more workshop time." p1
The need for more opportunities for connection		"Somethin' engaging like you can do your work but also engage with the teacher at the same time. So like you do your work and then have a conversation about something that doesn't relate to the lesson." p26
The label of offender is heavy		"Nowhere would take me and stuff like that. Just cos obviously I've been in prison and they're like ah taking a prisoner into a school is…" p.5
Meaningless learning: Reliance on extrinsic motivation		"They… get you to engage by adding… say you get so and so points in every lesson at the end of the week you get a goody bag and that's what makes people engage." p.2

Personal Experiential Theme	Subtheme (s)	Example Excerpt
Freedom through the power of choice		"I'd go round to the kids and find out what they want to do. I wouldn't just put them in it. If they don't want to do it. Find out what they want to do. That's the start." p16
A more personalised approach to learning	Building on strengths	"I've been teaching the boys how to throw a rugby ball and that because I played it for three years." p17
	The struggle to access a supportive education	"You're in a small group. Like in schools you got one teacher between 30 kids. Here you got one teacher between 5 or 6 people. But even then, they struggle to get round to do… here they struggle with it." p6

M5

Personal Experiential Themes (Chris)

Personal Experiential Theme	Subtheme (s)	Example Excerpt
Changing perceptions	Challenging others' preconceptions	"Urm cos I feel like jail is stereotyped way too much. Do you know what I'm saying? Like, I was chatting to someone over the phone today and they was saying 'what you're in jail like?' It's not what people think it is all the time. I want to show people what it's really like." p10
	Personal growth	"Obviously I've matured innit. Because before I was thinking 'hell no, that's all long' now I realise it's actually very important." p20
The need for recognition	External validation as motivation	"I just want to get my PhD. Obviously, that's a long-term goal. I feel like it will make my parents proud." p11
	The desire for influence and power	"Asking if they have any questions and concerns. What else? I would be asking them for their feedback. How to make school better and stuff." p17
Education as preparation for life	Valuing practical and functional education	"Teach about the economy. Teach about stuff that should have been taught in high school. Teach about you know like taxes and yeah." p13
	Limited functional opportunities on the segregation unit	"I feel like they need to make more worksheets as well. Cos

Personal Experiential Theme	Subtheme (s)	Example Excerpt
		right now they only got maths, English and PSD." p7
Education is for all	Embracing diversity	"I'd probably name it like, I had a name in my head, it's going to come back to me. The school of hard knocks" p12
	The need for personalised learning	"You know a bit challenging, obviously examples of how to do it." p6
Relationships have the power to make education fun		"Teacher would probably be having tutor time with the kids in the morning time. The teacher would probably be teaching them blackjack. Or yeah… playing some card games." p15

M6

Personal Experiential Themes (Josh)

Personal Experiential Theme	Subtheme (s)	Example Excerpt
The power of relationships	The importance of feeling cared for	"Yeah, like I think with other kids in terms of learning… feeling supported and feeling cared for. Knowing your worth. Feeling appreciated. Obviously, that benefits me and functioning in life – if you feel like you're wanted there." p33
	Inspired by role models	"Obviously I'm not from a gang so it's a bit different but it still felt like I could connect with them and change the way I am and the way I was acting. It was good to have someone come in and speak to us" p6
	Education as a space for supporting social, emotional and mental health	"Well I like PSD, the critical thinking, especially because I like learning more about myself and the mind. Ways that I can improve myself and my mind and interactions with other people. Also, if I'm having a discussion or an argument, which is a lot of what critical thinking is, having to see it from both sides and having to put forward a good strong argument for it and improve how I articulate myself" p22
Outgrowing the system	From disengagement to determination	"A lot of the time at the start I would zone out of work and into their conversation now it's that I

Personal Experiential Theme	Subtheme (s)	Example Excerpt
		zone out of the conversation and into my work." p16
	Feeling stagnant in education	"So that's a whole month in your cell, you're just sitting on the landing playing games or whatever. That's not constructive for the mind, you know?" p10
	Feeling overlooked and misunderstood	"But when my level of learning hasn't been acknowledged the tasks they have given me are pretty sort of basic. Simple." P.3
		"When they say this is what you're doing well and they don't just pick up on the negatives or when they let me know it's an improvement…if they let you know you're doing well you want to do more of it, you want to carry on growing in that area." p31
	Variety fuels growth for all	"There's different options that you can see… there's football pitches, there's quiet garden areas, maybe a mechanics workshop or maybe there's a bricks workshop or something. So you can see there's all different options." p24
Taking responsibility for learning: A necessity, not a choice	Reaching goals without support from education	"Especially if their mindset isn't mature enough to think… well I'm going to do this for myself. They might think… no ones helping

Personal Experiential Theme	Subtheme (s)	Example Excerpt
		me… why should I bother? That's it. You know. Then they're not having that following up, encouragement, you know?" p20
	Separated from personal support networks	"I've got a very close, small family; my mum, my grandpa and my nan. It's just us three really. They are all very supportive of my learning and that's been a very powerful part…they are always encouraging me." p27
Motivated yet powerless		"But I don't know if I am always able to make the most of it. I want to make the most of it and I try to make the most of it but I don't always think I am able to make the most of it." p17

M7

Personal Experiential Themes (Jayden)

Personal Experiential Theme	Subtheme (s)	Example Excerpt
Education should prioritise wellbeing	Education should be enjoyable	"It's not very enjoyable…like entertaining." p2
	Relationships are important	"Not so like strict… if that makes sense? I know there's rules and regulations in jail but like interact more. Do you know what I'm trying to say like?" p10
	The need for space to regulate emotions	"Boxing – so you had somewhere to take out your anger. You know what I'm saying?" p8
More than just a label		"People who haven't worked in this environment before they just treat us like school kids… we're not like… do you know what I'm saying? We're criminals." p5
Education without freedom	Feeling confined in education	"This is just like a break out room – you know what I'm saying? Somewhere you can calm down in… it's not a classroom. Like a holding room or something." p12
	There is a lack of autonomy in education	"He's here. He does the music here. We never get him. [name]'s pathway, so we never get him." p1

M8

Personal Experiential Themes (Shaquille)

Personal Experiential Theme	Subtheme (s)	Example excerpt
Voiceless in the system	Feeling unheard and ignored	"You know what… I say with education… they just need to… they need to listen to us… literally. They need to let our voice kind of be heard." p24
	Navigating a lack of autonomy in the system	"I'm meant to be doing either music production or… I didn't get to finish my qualification I was doing… I was like halfway, innit." p7 "I'm the headteacher aren't I?" p23
The power of connection	Shaped by connections of the past and future	"What will I name my school? My old school [names school]. Welcome to [name removed] high school." p15 "My family cook, they always cook anyway. After my nan died, they just did a little business In her name, innit." p9
	Building relationships with teachers beyond authority	"Don't take your job too serious cos when you do take your job too serious that's when you don't build kind of good relationships with children. So, I feel like I want staff to come do their job like but at the same time don't take it too serious. That's for the classroom teachers, obviously. So, they can build more of a bond with the children. Get me?" p20

Personal Experiential Theme	Subtheme (s)	Example excerpt
	The power of fun in education	"Next to that there will be a big astro and next to that there will be a little basketball area to play basketball. So, we will have a football ground, obviously with fake grass or whatever so that people that want to play football can go into there. Next door they have a basketball hoop for basketball. In the main part, which is the big part where everyone will want to chill… there's a ping pong table there… what else? A separate area for if people want to get involved with playing cards." p16
Seeking safety in education		"Cos it's safer and more secure. You don't want issues with anyone outside. They can show their face and their cards obviously to show its them." p14
Education as a place for change	Education as a pathway to the future	"Obviously, like, to go to certain jobs you're going to have to have maths so you know how to calculate stuff, subtract stuff or count stuff up." p11
	Teachers support growth	"Then my maths teachers [name] he would like help me get to where I would want to reach and like help me with any of the qualifications like my level ones.

Personal Experiential Theme	Subtheme (s)	Example excerpt
		He pushed me towards them. Helping me when I need help." p2
The desire to be seen	An individual with strengths and flaws	"Obviously, kids are going to be naturally, we are all going to do something that is troublesome but I want smart kind of kids as well." p22
	A place for everyone	"You know what in schools and that, or just in the system people feel like their kind of culture is left out. So, you want people to feel like cool at least my history is being noticed." p19

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