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# Staff Members' Perceptions of General Education Development Programs in Virginia's Correctional System

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# Walden University

College of Education

This is to certify that the doctoral study by

Andrew Beamon

has been found to be complete and satisfactory in all respects,  
and that any and all revisions required by  
the review committee have been made.

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Walden University  
2018

Abstract

Staff Members' Perceptions of General Education Development Programs in Virginia's

Correctional System

by

Andrew L. Beamon

EdS, George Washington University, 2002

MEd, Virginia Commonwealth University, 1990

BS, Virginia Commonwealth University, 1981

Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Education

Walden University

February 2019

## Abstract

The Virginia Department of Corrections mandates that all offenders without a high school diploma or general equivalency diploma (GED) are required to be enrolled in GED programs offered in the prison system. However, these programs have shown varying rates of success. Supported by the constructivist theory, the purpose of this qualitative case study was to identify how correctional education staff members perceived the effectiveness of the GED programs. Data from surveys and interviews with 9 educational correctional staff members were collected and analyzed for themes. Findings indicated that (a) participants use computer software for effective instruction, (b) offenders who were enrolled in correctional education programs successfully reenter society after being released from incarceration, and (c) offenders' self-efficacy is related to GED instruction. Findings may be used to improve GED programs to support offenders in obtaining a GED and training to promote social justice by returning to their communities more prepared to obtain jobs and contribute to the global economy.

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## Dedication

I would like to dedicate this dissertation to my assistant superintendent of schools' operations, Dr. Anita Prince. She provided endless motivation, sacrificing of time, and being my number one cheerleader. She was able to provide a constant voice of peace and focus during a time of frustration and uncertainty. For that I am eternally grateful. She kept encouraging me even when I swore that I would discontinue my quest to finish this dissertation. She showed the reverse when others' negativity inspired me to feel that I would never succeed. Because of her dedication to helping me, I was able to grow intellectually, personally, and spiritually. I will forever admire and keep her in my heart, not only as my boss and coworker, but as someone who truly demonstrated genuine concern about me as a human being. I thank God she was there for me when I no longer had confidence in myself and my ability to finish my dissertation.

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To my father, a great leader in my life, the late A.C. Beamon, I will miss our interesting and long-lasting chats. He was encouraging and always enthusiastic about my success. He was always keen to know what I was doing and how I was proceeding, although it is likely that he never grasped what it was all about! I miss his screaming at me to always do my best and to never give up on myself. Although I never liked the

yelling, I know and understand that it truly was out of love and never wanting me to do less than my best, not only for me, but for all of those in my life the way that he did.

I am grateful to my siblings (four brothers and one sister). I am especially grateful to my late mother, Helen, who helped me to understand how important it is to use your common sense in life. My mother did not have a high school diploma or GED. Education was not encouraged by my late grandparents. However, my mother understood the importance of education for her children and provided all of the moral and emotional support that we needed to get through school. I am very fond of saying to everyone, "I know that my mother did not finish high school but she is one of the smartest people that I know." I think that I owe the most to my mother; she taught me about faith in God and other than God, I am most grateful to her for all of the good in my life. I am also grateful to my other extended family members and friends who have supported me along the way.

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finds a wife, finds a good thing.” Truly if a man has a supporting wife such as the one I have, he does have a good thing.

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## Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study

According to the United States Bureau of Justice Statistics (as cited in Harlow, 2003), 68% of incarcerated individuals in the United States did not have a high school diploma or a general equivalency diploma (GED). Additionally, only 26% of incarcerated individuals were reported to have earned a GED during the time of their incarceration (Davis, Mottern, & Ziegler, 2010). Virginia legislators mandated that education services be provided to all incarcerated individuals in correctional facilities, which includes the opportunity to earn a GED or high school diploma (Virginia Department of Education Office of Career, Technical, and Adult Education [VDOE-OCTAE], 2017). The Virginia Department of Corrections Department of Correctional Education (VDOC-DCE, 2018e) was charged with coordinating with noneducation administration corrections to release as many offenders as possible with at least a GED.

### **Background**

There is tension between institutional personnel and legislators regarding support for correctional facilities to provide educational opportunities for offenders. Evetts (2014) argued that public initiatives should be driven by questions about who the primary stakeholders are, what their experience has been, and how improvements can be made based on a gap analysis of the current state versus the desired state. The VDOC-DCE (2018a, 2018d) exists for the purpose of providing educational programs and related services to adults and juveniles incarcerated in Virginia. For the VDOC-DCE and its peer organizations in other states, the provision of education to offenders is part of a larger project of reducing recidivism and rehabilitating offenders. However, neither scholars nor

policymakers have been able to verify whether the provision of education through VDOC-DCE and comparable bodies has been effective, both in comparison to nonincarcerated learner populations and from the perspective of learner satisfaction. May and Brown (2011) noted that “there are no comprehensive statistics detailing the education currently provided in detention centers nationally” (p. 771), suggesting that there is no sound empirical basis for understanding the effectiveness of GED teaching programs. May and Brown did not focus enough attention on the important question of how offenders and correctional staff members perceive the effectiveness of correctional education. Lack of effective GED programs may account for the increased rate of recidivism in the incarcerated population.

Students in prison schools have multicultural backgrounds. The ethnicity of the offenders is a factor that correctional staff members need to consider in their perception of the effectiveness of GED programs in correctional classrooms. Coggshall, Osher, and Colombi (2013) stated that teachers of diverse classes should not ignore race and cultures. Teachers of multicultural students should incorporate content from different cultures (Thompson, 2014). Gansle, Noell, and Burns (2012) reported that the manner in which African American and Hispanic elementary school students are prepared to participate in a global society is related to the quality of the teaching strategies used by their teachers. Teachers should respond academically to diverse students (Mazoue, 2013) by taking ownership of the effectiveness of the educational program to foster student achievement (Duwe & Clark, 2014).



### **Problem Statement**

The correctional school system in Virginia has shown varying rates of success (as measured by GED pass rates) among different GED programs (VDOC-DCE, 2018a). Program success rates vary from 83% to 15% (Davis et al., 2010). These varying success rates exist even though GED programs are similar in terms of structure, administration, and the apportioning of VDOC-DCE staff members. Given the high level of standardization and random sorting, all GED programs should have uniform pass rates, but some programs do better than others within the DCE school system. Key to the success of the GED programs is the role of correctional educational staff members who deliver these programs. However, their views on the structure and effectiveness of the programs have not been assessed.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this qualitative case study was to identify how correctional education staff members perceive the effectiveness of the DCE's GED program. The mission of the Virginia Department of Corrections is to maintain a low recidivism rate (VDOC-DCE, 2018b). As with other correctional programs, correctional education is an important strategy for achieving and maintaining that goal. For offenders to reenter their communities as productive citizens, VDOC-DCE correctional staff members should deliver instruction to all offenders who do not have high school diplomas or GEDs (Davis et al., 2010). Because educational staff members deliver these programs to offenders enrolled in school, their perspectives might give insight into the problem.

### **Research Question**

The overall mission of VDOC-DCE is to release ex-offenders into their communities more prepared to be productive citizens than they were when they were convicted and incarcerated. Offering instruction to offenders is DCE's contribution to VDOC-DCE's mission (VDOC-DCE, 2018). To identify correctional staff members' perceptions of the effectiveness of the GED program, I posed the following research question: How do correctional staff members of incarcerated GED students perceive educational success?

### **Conceptual Framework**

The conceptual framework for this qualitative case study was the constructivist theory. Baxter and Jack (2008) adopted Stake's (1995) and Yin's (2003) qualitative approach to a case study based on the constructivist paradigm. Constructivists claim that the truth is relative and dependent on a person's perspective (Baxter & Jack, 2008). This paradigm "recognizes the importance of the subjective human creation of meaning but doesn't reject the notion of objectivity. Pluralism, not relativism, is stressed with focus on the circular dynamic tension of subject and object" (Crabtree & Miller, 1999, p. 10). Baxter and Jack stated that collaboration between the researcher and the participant, while enabling participants to offer their perspective, is one advantage of the qualitative case study design.

I chose this research design based on Yin's (2003) reasons for selecting a case study design: (a) the case study answers a *how* question; (b) the researcher does not manipulate the behavior of the participants involved in the study; and (c) the contextual

conditions of the study are relevant to the phenomenon of the study. My research question addressed the perceptions of correctional education staff members regarding the effectiveness of the GED program in correctional schools. The survey questions that I asked the participants were designed to elicit the participants' perceptions of the mandated educational program.

### **Nature of the Study**

I adopted a qualitative approach and case study design to explore correctional staff members' assessments of the efficacy of GED programs. The qualitative approach was used to identify what offenders need in the GED program and to provide recommendations that could lead to a more successful GED model. I explored and categorized the perceptions of correctional school staff members regarding what constitutes a successful GED program in the VDOC-DCE and what constitutes a less successful GED program in the VDOC-DCE. The focus of a research study is dependent on the way a phenomenon is presented to an intersubjective community and not on the way a phenomenon appears to an individual subject (Englander, 2012). The identified phenomenon in this case study was GED program success, which was defined as having a pass rate higher than the state public average. To understand this phenomenon, I gathered insights from correctional staff teachers of students who are successful and correctional staff teachers of students who are not successful or who demonstrate difficulty with being successful.

### **Definitions**

Terms used in this study were defined as follows:

*Andragogy*: A term to describe an adult learning theory. Andragogy specifies that adult students need to focus on process and less on content when being taught (UK Essays, 2016).

*Correctional institutions*: Correctional facilities (VDOC, 2018).

*General education development (GED)*: A system of four standardized examinations that entitle those who pass to receive a credential considered an equivalent to the completion of high school (VDOE, 2018c).

*Inmate, offender, or prisoner*: A man or woman incarcerated in an adult prison or institution (VDOC, 2018c).

*Recidivism*: An incarcerated person who is released from prison, commits another crime, and is reincarcerated (VDOC, 2018d).

### **Assumptions**

The main assumption of the study was that distinctions between a successful and unsuccessful achieving GED program could be identified. I assumed that participants would be able to shed light on the meaning of good or bad pedagogy in GED programs in the Virginia correctional school system. Englander (2012) noted that researchers generally make the assumption that subjects have relevant experience and want to discuss the phenomenon under study.

### **Scope and Delimitations**

This qualitative case study was conducted to investigate the effectiveness of correctional education GED programs. Correctional schools across the state of Virginia operate according to mandated standard practices. The success of the offenders in earning

their GED varies across the state. Data collected by DCE (2017) revealed that GED pass rates across the state in Virginia were inconsistent. The study was designed to identify correctional education staff members' perceptions of the successfulness of GED programs in Virginia. The study was delimited to nine GED staff members in the state of Virginia. The results of the case study are not generalizable to GED programs across the state of Virginia or the United States.

### **Limitations**

The principal limitation of the study was that participants could experience the same phenomenon and report that their students are in a good correctional education program. The number of participants in the study was limited to nine correctional staff members. The results of the case study are not generalizable to GED programs across the state of Virginia or the United States.

### **Significance**

The local significance of the study was based on the study's potential impact on VDOC-DCE GED programs. There was significant variance in GED pass rates in Virginia jails and prisons with outcomes ranging from 83% at the upper end to 14% at the lower end (VDOC, 2017a). The insights generated from this study might lead to pedagogical changes that raise GED pass rates, thereby contributing to the social change goals of lowering recidivism and improving the economy. According to Justice and Meares (2014), offenders with GEDs have lower recidivism and higher employment than those without GEDs after release from incarceration.

The United States Department of Justice, Bureau of Justice Statistics (as cited in Carson, 2016) reported that there were 2.4 million incarcerated adults in the United States as of 2006. Incarcerated adults cause a strain on families in societies. Incarcerated adults contribute minimally to society and place a burden on society in terms of requiring clothing, housing, food, medical services, and other social expenses. In other words, incarceration places a strain on societal taxes and budgets (Carson, 2016).

Justice and Meares (2014) reported that offenders who earn their GED while in prison are better behaved, receive parole earlier, and obtain better jobs when released than offenders who do not earn GEDs. Virginia law requires that every offender under the age of retirement who does not have a disability or is otherwise exempt from attending school be enrolled in school to earn a GED (VDOC-DCE, 2018). VDOC-DCE schools administer tests four times a year. Effective instruction for all students is essential to achieving a 79% (the Virginia-wide GED graduation rate) or better pass rate on the GED tests each year (VDOC-DCE, 2017).

This study addressed correctional staff members' impressions of what makes certain programs more successful than others, thereby providing an empirical basis for improving GED pass rates for offenders enrolled in VDOC-DCE educational programs. Improvement in these programs may not only enhance students' success rate, but may increase correctional education staff members' comfort level with the program. In addition, correctional education administrators may have a basis for consistent evaluations of the program.

## **Summary**

This qualitative case study addressed successful and unsuccessful pedagogy as perceived by correctional education staff members. Findings from staff members of students of similar backgrounds in high-achieving and low-achieving DOC-DCE programs may be used to identify program differences, which can be addressed to improve GED pass rates in Virginia. Chapter 2 presents a literature review that addresses the success and failure factors in prison pedagogy from the dual viewpoint of instructional quality and policy influences.

## Chapter 2: Literature Review

This chapter provides a review of the literature on the topic of correctional education staff members' perception of successful GED programs in VDOC-DCE schools. DCE (2017) defined a successful program as having a pass rate of between 79% and 83%, depending on the year, and an unsuccessful program as having a pass rate of between 15% and 20%. Chapter 2 also includes the literature search strategy, conceptual framework, literature review related to key variables and concepts, and the summary and conclusion. The Literature Search Strategy section includes a list of search engines and databases used as well as search terms. I also describe the iterative search process explaining terms used. In the Conceptual Framework section, I identify and describe the phenomenon and synthesize writings of theorists and philosophers. The literature review related to key variables and key concepts provides a synthesis of the literature published within the past 5 years.

### **Literature Search Strategy**

The literature search strategy included three types of sources pertinent to the study: published books, peer-reviewed journal articles, and reputable scholarly web publications. Key phrases included in the search included *academic achievement*, *instructional strategies*, *physical manipulatives*, *virtual manipulatives*, *mathematics instruction and professional development*, *teacher self-efficacy*, *teaching math with manipulatives*, and *middle grades math and manipulatives*. To locate and access relevant books, journal articles, and reputable web publications, I typed the key phrases into the following Internet search engines and databases: Educational Resource Information



Center (ERIC), ProQuest, ECHOST, WorldCat, Education Research Complete, Education from SAGE, and Google Scholar. I identified over 100 sources relevant to the subject under study.

### **Conceptual Framework**

The conceptual framework of this study was based on the adult learning theory of Knowles (Knowles, Holton, & Swanson, 2012). Knowles et al. (2012) defined *andragogy* as the “art and science of helping adults learn” (p. X). Knowles et al. (2012) postulated a set of assumptions regarding the adult learner. According to Knowles et al. (2012), the adult learner

- requires less dependency as he or she matures and moves more towards self-directing his or her own learning,
- uses his or her own experiences to help with learning,
- is ready to learn from new social experiences,
- applies new learning to solving problems, and
- is partial to internal learning as oppose to external learning.

Knowles et al. (2012) noted that the five adult learner assumptions had implications for practice. Knowles et al. (2012) recommended that adult educators

- create a climate of cooperative learning in the classroom,
- structure instruction based on students’ individual needs and interests,
- relate instructional activities to achieve the objectives,
- work collaboratively with the students to select resources, and
- consistently evaluate the quality of the educational program.

Knowles et al. (2012) wrote that adults need to understand why they are learning something. Effective teachers do not take for granted that keeping adults involved in the process of learning is necessary for progress to occur (Knowles et al., 2012). Adults perform best in the classroom when they comprehend immediate use of what they are learning (Knowles et al., 2012). It is necessary for educators of adult learners to involve them in solving real-life problems (Knowles et al., 2012).

Andragogy is a learning theory that provides insight into how adults learn. The implication of this learning theory is that learning is self-directed and draws on personal experience and interests (Knowles et al., 2012). It is important for educators of adult students to design students' learning objectives and instructional activities on solving real-life problems. Adult educators also need to involve their students in the process of selecting resources for their learning (Knowles et al., 2012). Regarding the current study, andragogy addressed the elements and programs vital in adult learning. Andragogy provided a conceptual backbone for this study to explore the perceived effectiveness of GED programs in correctional adult schools.

### **Literature Review Related to Key Concepts**

In 1942 the GED credential was created as an option for veterans returning from war to facilitate the completion of a high school education to provide access to higher education and civilian work. The GED was established to provide veterans without a high school diploma the opportunity to earn credit for their informal education outside of

school. Civilians were permitted to access the examination in 1952 (Goldin, 1999). According to Goldin (1999), this legislation was followed by the passage of the G.I. Bill of Rights in 1994 to provide support for veterans to earn a college degree. These changes were considered the second shift in United States schooling and focused on high school movement (Goldin, 1999). The United States was the first country to provide this support for high school students and veterans. As the GED was expanded to include civilians in 1952, the program included offenders in the prison system (Goldin, 1999). After President Johnson supported Congress in passing the legislation, President Clinton continued by demonstrating similar thinking: “Education is the fault line, the great Continental Divide between those who will prosper and those who will not in the new economy” (as cited in Nicholas, 1996, p. 14). The Pell grants made it possible for many offenders to access the GED program and other educational programs (Nicholas, 1996).

### **Pell Grants and Offender Access to Education Programs**

Pell grants were a federal grant program to support the education costs for individuals from poor families, and the Pell Grant program was extended to offenders in prison in the 1960s under President Johnson (Ubah, 2004). Pell grants were not repaid and were based on the premise that the education would better equip offenders with job

skills and social skills to improve social bonding and reduce future criminal behavior. The Violent Crime Control and Law Enforcement Act (Gehring, 1997) eliminated the Pell grants causing all postsecondary educational programming for incarcerated individuals to be eliminated. A shift in thinking on the part of legislative stakeholders occurred from the time in which Pell grants were implemented to when they were eliminated in 1997 (Gehring, 1997). The original Pell grants were intended for soldiers who served in the military and were expanded to include incarcerated men as well. The shift in thinking was toward more support for soldiers and toward providing only GED training in prisons.

The end of Pell grants for offenders meant that, in many instances, teachers could no longer motivate students to enroll in a GED program with the hopes of advancing into another degree plan after completing the GED. For many prisoners, the GED program was the first step toward additional education while incarcerated and served to motivate student prisoners to learn while in prison. The end of the Pell Grant program for offenders led to 2- and 4-year colleges shutting down their programs for offenders (Delisle & Miller, 2015). Delisle and Miller (2015) noted a major paradigm shift in the way that offenders thought of further education after the end of the Pell grants as it closed options for higher education. For many, the GED ceased to be a stepping-stone to additional education, creating challenges for teachers when attempting to enroll offenders. As correctional educational staff communicated the value and practical

applicability of GED education to their incarcerated students, the offenders were not interested due to this shift in what was provided for prisoners. However, because Yates and Lakes (as cited in Delisle & Miller, 2015) reached this conclusion on anecdotal information, the topic required further research. It is not clear whether the end of the Pell Grant program continues to negatively affect incarcerated learners who cannot leverage their GEDs into further education, and it is also not clear whether GED teachers have been working harder to motivate their incarcerated students.

### **Rationale for Educational Prison Programs**

The creation and implementation of prison education programs has been shown to reduce prison inmate violence and reduce the chance that the offender will engage in crime after release (Pompoco, Wooldredge, Lugo, Sullivan, & Latessa, 2017). Education programs include GED programs, vocational training programs, adult basic education, college classes, and apprenticeships (Brazzell, Crayton, Mukamal, Solomon, & Lindahl, 2009; Pompoco et al., 2017). More structured time through the class offerings to support a better job opportunity once released or to return to college have been motivators for offenders. Illiteracy rates are higher in prisons with approximately over 30% of the offenders not having a high school diploma or GED (Harlow, 2003). Before 2003, the rates for not having a high school diploma were double (68%) between 1991 and 1997 (Travis, 2011).

Prison programming is about reeducating offenders so they will not offend again and preparing the offender for the transition to society. Institutional programs have been linked to positive outcomes after release (Sperber, Latessa, & Makarios, 2013). In a study

of Ohio offenders released between 2008 and 2012 who attended an education program or started an educational program, Pompoco et al. (2017) found that offenders who completed the GED program in prison were found to have a significant difference in their recidivism rate compared to release offenders who did not participate in an educational program. Overall, the GED inmates' recidivism rate and violent misconduct rates while in prison were significantly lower than the inmates who had not attended a GED program. The implications for GED programs or other education programs are important for officer and inmate safety and for offenders transitioning out of the prison. To create and implement a successful GED and supplemental educational program, it is important to understand the pedagogy and composition used in the prison as an institution.

### **Composition of Prison Population**

Most prison populations contain more minorities than White individuals. Black drivers were 30% more likely to be pulled over for a traffic stop than White drivers (Durose & Langton, 2013). Once stopped, Black drivers were searched more than three times the rate of White drivers (Durose & Langton, 2013). Black men have been found to receive a longer sentence than the White individuals for comparable crimes (Rehavi & Starr, 2014). These data may cause one to wonder and understand about the population status of prison populations in the United States. For example, in New Orleans, Chui and Cheng (2013) reported that one in 14 Black men were imprisoned and one in seven were either on probation, in prison or on parole. Programs like the drug abuse and resistance program used in the school systems to educate youth on drugs and violence did not address the influences or factors that contributed to youth engaging in violent behavior or

criminal acts (Burke, 2002). Children who experience or witness violence were prone to participate in violent behavior (Mauer & Huling, 1995). The community and culture that one is born into influences the course of their future. In these environments, children were held accountable for their behavior and told that if they ended up in prison it was their fault for the choices they made. This way of thinking of adults or the pedagogy of adults influenced how youth perceived themselves and their opportunities to break free from the cycle of the culture in to which they were born (Ross, 2018).

**Lenient and strict discipline education system push out students.** In addition to providing a quality education, safety for students and teachers is a top priority for school officials (Varela et al., 2018). A school safety priority has led several schools to incorporate strict discipline across the United States (Crenshaw, Ocen, & Nanda, 2015). Betsy DeVos was appointed by Donald Trump in March 2018 to lead the commission for school safety (U.S. Department of Education, 2018). School discipline is good and necessary. The problem is, however, there are ethnic inequalities correlated with school punishments (Varela et al., 2018). Varela et. al. (2018) stated that students generally drop out of school for two reasons: (a) economic and social reasons; reasons such as the need to obtain employment to support one's family or perhaps a baby due to pregnancy and (b) forced out for discipline reasons. The percentage of students who are pushed out for discipline reasons is higher among urban students as compared to rural and suburban schools. In urban schools 12% are pushed out in comparison to 6% of rural and suburban schools (Varela et al., 2018). According Varela, et. al., (2018) a higher level of racial diversity exists in urban schools than rural and suburban schools. School strictness also

appears to be more prevalent in urban schools and more lenient in rural and suburban schools.

### **Change in stakeholders' pedagogy in educational and prison institutions**

**needed.** The values of the prison staff and administrators often conveyed a focus on how to be a worker rather than how to develop one's mind for higher education. One participant described the emphasis on learning how to be a landscaper or repair shoes which were not valid options for jobs in the post-carceral content (Runell, 2018). Another participant described that the students who were under the age of 21 years were prioritized for a GED as it the state regulations required inmates 21 years or younger to work on their GED, however it as an older inmate, it was not required by the state to provide the GED education and thus older inmates were passed over by the administrators to enroll in the GED program. Other participants noted that there were very few higher education classes that were made available to the incarcerated individuals while serving time.

### **Criminal Justice System Role in Education Citizens**

The public school and criminal justice systems are thought to fulfill an educational function to help individuals gain an understanding of what it means to be a citizen. Justice and Meares (2014) noted that criminal justice systems function in the role of educating incarcerated individuals. In other words, "Observers of the initiation of the prison system called San Quentin, a "college of morals" (Fisher, 1995, p. 1235). With prison populations on the rise, this notion of providing formal training or education for the incarcerated individuals has become even more significant as an area of social reform



for stakeholders to address (Justice & Meares, 2014). There are overt and covert curricula in prison systems. The overt curricula focus on the notion of a positive civic identity, whereas the covert curricula are focused on the notion of the punishment, containing violence and transmits values of anti-citizens in how incarcerated inmates have been treated (Justice & Meares, 2014). Therefore, it is important for stakeholders recognizing the prison system as an institution that educates incarcerated inmates to align educational programs and services such as the GED to strengthen capacity for civic education.

Institutions in which there is a focus on democracy, and on the overt curriculum of citizen education uphold the state government stakeholders' premise that education and prison institutions could be instrumental in developing civic minded individuals. Using a curriculum that is aligned to this goal, focused on basic job skills, career transition with a component of counseling and support are ways in which to maintain civic education, GED programs and rehabilitation of the incarcerated inmates (Justice & Meares, 2014). State government officials should support the relationship of the intention or function of the institution to shape civic minded thinking and behavior.

### **Prisoner Education Options and Prisoner Perceptions**

There are educational opportunities in the prisons throughout the United States. Educational opportunities exist on a continuum and may include GED programs, GED programs with supplemental services, higher education opportunities and career or vocational training. Throughout the prison system, approximately one-half of the prisons offer some form of a post-secondary educational program and only 6% to 7% of the incarcerated inmate populations take advantage of the opportunity of postsecondary

education (Davis, Bozick, Steele, Saunders & Miles, 2013; Runell, 2018). The prison programs have different characteristics, serve different populations and provide varying services dependent on the prison in which an inmate is incarcerated. The Second Chance Act of 2007 created an opportunity for change in the prison system as the requirements of the act were to examine the progression of incarceration, unemployment, reoffending and re-incarcerations (Clear & Frost, 2015; Runell, 2018; Wakefield & Wildeman, 2013).

There are a number of reasons that inmates decide to attend a GED program or higher education program once they are incarcerated. The life-changing experience of being behind bars is a motivator for some inmates and others may feel the need to make life choices to lead them down a different path rather than the criminal behavior they engaged in to become incarcerated. For some inmates it is inspiring to attend a GED program and to continue college education as well as helping them demonstrate to others and themselves that they are committed to productive change (Runell, 2018; Soyer, 2014).

### **Challenges with Education Enrollment in Prison Programs**

It is important to understand what motivates a prisoner to enroll in a GED program and to examine the challenges an inmate may experience when trying to enroll in the GED or higher education program. In a qualitative study conducted by Runell (2018) of 34 currently and previously incarcerated individuals who were engaged in a higher education program were interviewed. Participant criteria for this study included having already completed a GED either prior to being incarcerated or in the carceral context. The interviewees were at varying stages of the post-carceral process as some

were still on probation, some were off probation, working, attending higher education institutions or earning money to proceed with enrolling in a higher education institution (Runell, 2018).

**Rigidity in enrollment for education in prisons.** The prison rules of who could be enrolled in a higher education program were presented as a problem. For example, as an inmate neared release, they were placed in the camps outside the prisons which had reduced security and were a transition ground for moving from carceral to post-carceral environments. While there was more freedom at the camp stage, fewer options were available for education. Higher education classes were no longer an option were no longer available at the camp stage. The only option at the camp stage was to continue working on a GED if one had not been obtained. Some participants reported the experience of working on a higher education class and then being transferred to the camps thereby losing their opportunity to complete the higher education course. Hence, the structure of the education programs and availability of the courses were not matched well to inmates needs nor were they flexible about when and where inmates could access higher education courses. The structure described did not serve to promote the idea of “to change for the better” (Runell, 2018 p. 9). Programs supporting educational options for incarcerated individuals were often not promoted so individuals had no information on their option for pursuing their education.

**System or program responsiveness.** The responsiveness of a system, program or individuals implementing a program are central in the success of system implementation. The variable of responsiveness can refer to any aspect of an educational

system or program that is characterized by flexibility in response to a student's needs and circumstances (Gostisha et al., 2014). Prison GED programs do not appear to have been responsive, given that the educational GED curriculum and aspects of pedagogical practice have been established by state statute. However, the curriculum prescribed by the state for the GED program is not the only hindrance to gaining a GED or higher education while incarcerated (Runell, 2018). These teachers encourage self-efficacy and growth among students as well as make instructional materials more meaningful to students (Stronge, 2018). The program characteristics of GED and education programs in prisons have shifted as globalization has occurred.

### **GED Program Characteristics**

The job market in the United States has changed to one that requires more technical skills and higher critical thinking skills. There has been an emphasis on college entry and graduation rates as well as a focus on developing technical skills to gain access to the jobs requiring technical expertise (Rutschow, & Crary-Ross, 2014). The shift in the required job skills has changed the focus of GED programs. There are few adult basic education or GED programs focusing on participants who function below the 9<sup>th</sup> grade or who can attend part-time (Travis, 2011). "The average inmate is less likely to have a high-school degree than is the average non-incarcerated adult in the United States, and two in five inmates fall below the literacy level compared with one in five in the general population" (Pompoco, et al., 2017, p. 517). Participants with lower job skills and basic skills require more intensive GED programming.

There are approximately 39 million adults, representing 18% of the adult population in the United States could benefit from GED programs and supplemental services (Crary-Ross, & Rutschow, 2014). Adults who are properly prepared for filling jobs and skills needed in the marketplace will provide a framework from which a more skilled workforce can be built (Rutschow, & Crary-Ross, 2014). Programs as they have been designed have been unsuccessful in meeting the goal of preparing large numbers of adults to obtain a GE and transition to the job market (Tyler, 2005; Zhang, Guison-Dowdy, Patterson, & Song, 2011). Therefore, there is a need to refine the structure of GED programs and services as they are designed to meet the needs of the population being served.

### **GED Program Reforms**

Reforms for the GED program has focused integrating basic skills and GED instruction within specific career fields and providing enhanced supports to ease students' entry into college, and GED programs that allow concurrent enrollment in a GED program and college. Furthermore, quality GED education programs have been characterized by coherent curricula, which align with participants' career aspirations, strengthened connections between the GED program and vocational programs, an advising component to engage students and support their transition goal from the GED program to college, technical training school or accessing the job market (Rutschow, & Crary-Ross, 2014). The perception of success or effectiveness of GED programs have been viewed through different lenses however the passing rate on the GED of those enrolled has remained one indicator which is often examined.

**Coherent and relevant instructional models.** This aspect of the GED program integrates basic skills using continuous lessons which align with the individual's job or career goals. The teacher builds the individualized lesson through monitoring how the individual is performing and adjusts in the curriculum to meet the individual's needs. The individualized lessons are based on students' personal learning plans (PLPs). The PLPs pertains to long term and short terms goals written generated by the students with the teachers' guidance (VDOC-DCE, 2018).

**Bridging to postsecondary education.** This process of bridging postsecondary education involves making a solid connection with the GED program participants and the next stage to which the individual is intending to continue study. For example, the bridge could be to a community college setting that provides on-line courses that offer certificate programs or two-year degree programs under the supervision of the correctional instructor. Another example of bridging would be the bridge between enrolling in a high school diploma program to obtain a GED and then moving into vocational certificate programs for which having a GED is often required (DOC-DCE, 2018).

**Using supplemental supports to cultivate engagement and transition.** This program provides counseling support for the individual across a variety of needs such as understanding college expectations, enrolling, staying engaged and providing ongoing transition counseling. In addition to education counseling, mental health counseling provides an avenue for offenders to stay focused on the goal of earning their GEDs. This intensive counseling support is provided concurrently while the individual is working on passing the GED exam. Other supplemental services with GED programs have been

proven successful supporting the educational needs of incarcerated offenders (DOC-DCE, 2018).

**Alternative GED programs with supplemental adult literacy needed.** Spring (2016) reported on the results of alternative literacy programs throughout the United States and discovered that such programs responded to the literacy needs of GED students who needed forms of academic engagement that did not exist in the GED classroom. Drawing on phenomenological interviews of offenders who were enrolled in alternative literacy programs, Springs discovered that such programs improved incarcerated students' self-reported academic performance through the following mechanisms: (a) Building a general sense of self-esteem and self-worth derived from writing and sharing personal work with trusted peers and a caring teacher and (b) applying grammatical and mechanical knowledge gained in the GED class to real-world and personal writing, thus creating improved creative literacy stimulating the students' academic learning leading increased motivation for the incarcerated adult to learn more. The result of learning more influenced incarcerated adults' sense of self-esteem and self-efficacy. Stimulating students' skill development to apply to real world situations through the literacy programs in the prison system is a supplemental program that has been used to coincide with the delivery of a GED program or the literacy program (Spring, 2016).

It is important to recognize the limitations of the Spring (2016) study as the design was a qualitative, phenomenological design in which only a handful of prisoners were interviewed, and it may have been possible that positive student responses to literacy programs delivered in an incarcerated environment were atypical of other

incarcerated students' perceptions. It was also not work specified whether the interviews were conducted in a single prison or in multiple prisons, leaving open the possibility that the data that made it into the study are spread too thin (in that they reflect the opinions of low numbers of offenders sampled from many prisons rather than building an in-depth analysis of a single prison's literacy dynamics). Nonetheless, Spring's work was useful for identification how alternative literacy programs can respond to incarcerated students' needs for self-expression, self-esteem, peer support, and practice of creative skills in a way that improves such students' GED performance. Spring's conclusion is that, while a prison GED program might not be the only program needed, the supplementation of such a program with an alternative literacy approach can create an overall system that is more responsive, and directly benefits the incarcerated individuals.

Specific GED program reforms have been recommended to align the individuals' skills and knowledge with the more rigorous demands of the job market as it has shifted since the inception of the GED program (Rutschow, & Crary-Ross, 2014). In addition, as technology has progressed the evolution of GED programs and higher education options has broadened for all adult learners (Rutschow, & Crary-Ross, 2014). Success of a GED program or GED program and supplemental literacy skills have been measured in several ways.

### **Measuring Success of GED Programs**

In a review of the correctional education literature and analysis of the findings from researchers, Muhlhausen (2015) concluded that we do not know enough to evaluate the effectiveness of the GED programs in prisons based on a review of existing studies.



In order to understand the best strategies from which incarcerated inmates learn, there needs to be a focus on the outcomes of this population in the environment and an examination of the strategies and techniques that were used to achieve the results (Muhlhausen, 2015). Researchers primarily have focused on the influence of educational programs on recidivism and prison violence creating an absence of any formative evaluation data on existing GED and supplemental education programs for incarcerated offenders. Passing, enrollment and participation rates have all been used to evaluate GED program effectiveness.

In the Virginia, and in other states, the VDOC-DCE stakeholders have defined a successful GED program as one in which 79 and 83%, of incarcerated individuals enrolled in the GED program as obtaining a passing score on the GED and an unsuccessful program as one in which only 15 and 20% of those incarcerated individuals enrolled as obtaining a passing score on the GED (VDOC-DCE, 2017a). Bozick, Steele, Davis, and Turner (2018) synthesized the literature evaluating the effectiveness of correctional education programs. Bozick et al. (2018) concluded that GED programs are successful in correctional facilities if the success of offenders earning their GED leads to lower recidivism rates (Bozick et al., 2018). Offenders were 28% less likely to recidivate if they earned their GED. Other means of measuring effectiveness included participation or involvement in the program which led to post-release employment as oppose to offenders who were not enrolled in correctional education programs (Bozick et al., 2018). Success in terms of obtaining the GED while enrolled is critical as obtaining a GED often allows the incarcerated inmate to enroll in further training and education (Meyer, &

Randel, 2013). While success in obtaining a GED and being able to access further educational training is important, there needs to also be a central focus on evaluating and understanding the correctional programs influence on the academic outcomes for incarcerated offenders. Recidivism and violence have been used to evaluate GED program and education program effectiveness. Other metrics which are valuable to consider include the constructs of equity and quality (Castro, Hunter, Hardison, & Johnson-Ojeda, 2018). Accreditation is central for all universities, however those who are incarcerated have few options for the course work and skill building thus making accreditation even more important to be addressed from an equity standpoint (Castro et al., 2018).

### **Benefits of Higher Education in Prison**

The incarceration rates in the United States are not decreasing and are rising considerably especially for women. Wagner and Walsh (2016) as stated in Baranger et al., 2018 noted that the United States had an incarceration rate of 693 individuals per 100,000 which makes the United States have the highest incarceration rate in the world. Incarceration for women has grown 834%, which is more than two times the growth rate for incarcerated men. This growth rate for women in prisons represents a growth of 834% in the last 40 years (Sawyer, 2018). Researchers have maintained the effectiveness of education in correctional facilities as a means which have resulted in reductions in recidivism, prison violence, better wages upon release, improved self-esteem and prosocial thinking (Baranger et al., 2018; Bozick et al., 2013; Gaes, 2008; Hall, 2015; Nally et al., 2014).

The results of prison education programs and Higher education prison programs have been established which benefit both the prisoner and society upon the inmate's release. There has not been a focus on what draws incarcerated inmates into enrolling in prison education programs. Baranger, Mastroilli, Matesanz and Rousseau (2018) investigated the psychosocial experiences of higher education of incarcerated women due to the significant rise in the number of female inmates. Baranger, et al (2018) were seeking to more deeply understand the influence of education on their prison experience and transition to the community. The researchers found that there were no significant differences between the male and female inmate populations as a single variable to predict incarceration. However, when other variables were controlled for such as "educational history, pre-incarceration income, visits from children, time served on current sentence, race/ethnicity, and participation in parenting, life skills, and reintegration programming, gender became a significant indicator of participation in postsecondary education programs" (Baranger et al, 2018 p. 2-3). Findings established that the most significant predictor of enrollment into educational programs was whether the incarcerated inmate received regular visits from family/children and if they were enrolled in life skills or a community re-integration program. An analysis of these findings suggests that Hirschi's (1969) work and theoretical notions advanced the notion that attachment to family and commitment to prosocial norms and institutions play an important role in reducing risk for deviance and criminality.

## **Roadblocks to Effective GED Educational Programs**

Offenders in correctional facilities enrolled in GED programs face challenges that they may not face in adult education programs outside of correctional facilities. There are occurrences that may interfere with the students' receptiveness of the teachers' efforts and the teachers' responsiveness to effect positive outcomes. The size of the classroom, ineffective instructional strategies, and teachers' inability to connect the curriculum to students' personal experiences and daily living, and teachers' failure to foster a favorable relationship with their students are all obstacles to success for correctional education students mainly due to the threat of fraternization charges (Edwards, 2018).

Fraternization occurs in the form of unwelcome sexual advances, sexual favors, and simply having a non-professional personal relationship with offenders and other employees during the performance of the work day (Mastropasqua, 2015). The VDOC-DCE has established guidelines, which include a brochure for fraternization (Commonwealth of Virginia – Department of Corrections Procedures (2018)). The roadblocks to effective GED programs are conditions that correctional educational staff members must consistently guard against for the benefit of their students.

**Teacher responsiveness and incarcerated individuals' learning.** One of the key problems in prison pedagogy is that, no matter how responsive a teacher manages to be in class, there are other circumstances that can prevent this responsiveness from leading to intended academic outcomes. Street (2014) presented the results of an ethnography and case study based on teaching writing to several women in a correctional facility in Westchester, New York. Street concluded from the study that women students

are incredibly motivated to succeed in class but are often hindered by strict prison time-keeping rules that leave little time for study. In other empirical studies carried out in non-incarcerated settings, teacher responsiveness has been held to be part of a virtuous circle along with studying. The study conducted by LoCasale-Crouch et al. (2016) demonstrated that teacher responsiveness in class motivated students to work harder on their own, which in turn prompted students to engage with teachers on a higher academic level in class, leading to more responsiveness on the part of the teacher, and so forth.

**Class size, private study time, and physical space.** The size of the GED classes as well as the space for private study time and physical space for the GED classes have all influenced the effectiveness of GED programs. In addition to the challenges posed by the relative absence of personal study time as an opportunity for each student to act on the responsiveness of the teacher (for example, by taking the teacher's suggestions to read or prepare additional material), there is also a challenge to responsiveness posed by the size of correctional education classes. Although the exact teacher-to-student ratio in correctional classes varies depending on the circumstances of individual programs, the class size is not typically large enough to accommodate the number of students eligible for enrollment in school creating waiting lists of eligible students waiting to be enrolled which can create a negative influence of the effectiveness of correctional education (DOC-DCE, 2018). According to Friesen, Kaye and Associates (2011) the smaller the class size (8-10 maximum), the more likely teacher responsiveness will be effective. However, Better Policies for Better Lives published that there is no agreement among scholars of a best student-teacher ratio to elicit effective teacher responsiveness (Kelleher

& Weir, 2016). According to *The Responsive Classroom Approach*, the essence of true teacher's responsiveness is a teacher's ability to move off topic and exchange information with students in an unstructured, informal way, driven by student needs based on an evidenced-base path which leads to students' academic engagement (Ross, 2018). This ability is curtailed when class sizes become too large. Lim et al. (2014) reported on a year-long interactive teaching experiment, class sizes were no larger than 15 students, and typically closer to 10-12 students, in order to give teachers time to respond to individual student returns within the flow of lessons Lim et al argued that, when class sizes were much larger than 15 and when there were additional pressures in place (such as the need to demonstrate an outcome based on standardized test results), then teachers' responsiveness is sacrificed to the need for efficiency. Gardner (2014) consistent with Lim et al. also argued that, the larger classes get, the more likely it is that they contain students of differing levels of ability and motivation, such that the larger a class gets, the less responsive a teacher can be.

**Teacher qualities and strategies.** Teacher personal qualities, knowledge of teaching strategies and responsiveness have promoted effective GED programs. The exercise of responsiveness in the correctional classroom can lead to better outcomes for students, as long as teachers understand how and why responsiveness should be exercised in the classroom. According to Selden (2015), the purpose of teacher responsiveness in the correctional GED classroom should be to promote emotions rather than cognitions. Selden argued that responsiveness ought to be used by correctional GED instructors to promote a pleasant experience in the classroom, consisting of emotions such as "mild joy,

curiosity, optimism, affection, and confidence” (p. 13). The kind of responsiveness discussed in Maher’s (2011) study was different and hinged more on cognitive experiences. For example, Maher reacted to her students’ motivation and enthusiasm by making suggestions for follow-up work and reflection that the students could not effectively carry out because of their time limitations. Alewine (2010) recommended a different approach, one in which responsiveness is used to make the classroom experience pleasant; for example, in Alewine’s pedagogical model, responsiveness can be used to address students by name, reply to some questions with appropriate humor and affection, and to model a general mood of confidence, curiosity, and optimism in the correctional classroom.

**Curriculum of GED program important to engagement.** Muth and Kiser as referenced in Keen and Woods article (2016) “Creating Activating Events for Transformative Learning in a Prison Classroom” argued that prison GED programs are organized in a top-down fashion focused more on output (in particular, GED pass rates, which are in turn hypothesized to lead to the output of lower levels of recidivism) than on process (such as individualized attention to learners in the classroom). Nonetheless, based on interviews with six prisoners and 25 prison educators led Muth and Kiser (2008) to believe that there are ways, even within the regimented and standardized organization of prison GED classrooms, to organize the process of instruction in a manner that raises the engagement level of the students. Muth and Kiser’s (2008) interviews of offenders revealed a negative correlation between organization and engagement. To the extent that the six offenders interviewed in this study felt stifled by a GED course that did not

deviate from a set path, they felt disengaged from the process of learning, which was in turn associated with reduced performance. Incarcerated individuals reported a preferred curriculum which was novel and tied to their aspirations and possible future job interests.

**Student-teacher interactions important to students' success.** Researchers appear to agree on some common factors that support effective teacher-student relationships. Lowry's student-faculty contact variable is essentially what Abrantes et al. cited in Hung, Chen, and Huang (2017) called student-teacher interaction. Lowry's contention that high expectations support positive teacher-student relations is connected to Mendenhall and Sincich's (2016) likeability or level of concern because students perceive high expectations as teachers believing in them and caring for them. Lowry's teaching qualities student-teacher interaction, responsiveness, organization, and likeability or concern perceived by the students from the teachers. Mendenhall and Sincich's instructor feedback was focused on teacher responsiveness; the peer interaction variable discussed by Lowry does not pertain to students or to the student-teacher dyad and thus has no equivalent in Mendenhall and Sincich's model of teacher effectiveness. Thus, four out of five of Lowry's et al. variables of instructional program quality and teacher quality are in essence identical to Mendenhall and Sincich's model of successful teaching and successful teacher-student relationships.

Successful teaching involves bonding with the students and establishing trusting relationships. There are four teacher qualities that are key in building a positive teacher-student relationship. Lockwood and Nally (2016) discovered that the equivalents of the four Mendenhall and Sincich (2016) variables of student-teacher interaction,



responsiveness, organization, and likeability or concern, which Lowry collapsed into the single variable of instructor support, were statistically significant predictors of achievement motivation. A one-unit increase in perceived instructor support was associated with a .12 increase in achievement motivation. The only other variable that was a statistically significant predictor of achievement motivation was peer support, a one-unit increase in which was associated with a .14 increase in achievement motivation. Thus, instructor support was the second-most important predictor of academic motivation in the Lowry's et al. model, rendering it worthy of further examination in a qualitative study. Second, Lowry et al. found that program engagement was not a significant mediator or moderator of the relationships between instructor support and academic achievement, but that program engagement was a mediating variable between instructor support and achievement motivation. Thus, future studies of the relationship between the Mendenhall and Sincich (2016) variables and the achievement motivation component of student success ought to focus more closely on the role of program engagement.

**Student success.** Lowry's et al (2016) work was an ambitious, wide-ranging examination of student success because it treated the variables of instructional program quality as only part of a larger model of student success. The proposed study is focused on instructional quality, and specifically on aspects of instructional quality that involve either the teacher or the teacher-student dyad in a manner reflected in the Mendenhall and Sincich's (2016) model. One of the characteristics that makes Lowry's et al. (2016) work particularly useful is that Lowry empirically tested the contributions of three different sets of independent variables—student characteristics, instructional program

characteristics, and institution characteristics—to the dependent variable of student outcomes, and also examined the role of program engagement as an intermediate variable between the independent variables and dependent variable of his model.

### **Perception of Incarcerated Prisoners Regarding GED Programs**

One of Lowry's et al. (2016) methodological techniques was to identify and control for variables that helped to determine the nature of the incarcerated student's interaction with the educational system in prison. For researchers interested in correctional education, the central dilemma in this regard was articulated by Davis and Turner (2018). These researchers questioned whether or not prison offenders' educational motives were pushed or pulled. As Justice and Meares (2014) pointed out, the ability of instructional quality to shape students' outcomes depended on the kinds of motivations that students bring to the teacher-student relationship. Davis et al. (2014) conducted a meta-review of the literature and concluded the existence of a theory that prisoners who considered themselves pushed into education, rather than pulled into it, were less successful, because 'pushed' students—that is, students who were compelled to enter into a class or program of study—were less motivated and therefore less successful. This theory, however, has not been validated in the empirical literature. For example, Meyer as cited in "Instructional Interventions That Motivate Classroom Learning" (Lin-Siegler et al., 2016) did not discover any correlation between motivation and achievement. In other words, students do not necessarily achieve because external motivators are administered by teaching staff. Many students achieve regardless of the teaching style of

their teachers, and despite the feedback that they receive from their teachers. It is more important to comprehend what motivates students to achieve (Sharma, 2018).

Prisoner motivation deserves closer examination. Even in a purely push-oriented model, such as that of GED education in the state of Virginia, there are likely to be important differences between how offenders perceived their participation in academic programs. Tewksbury and Stengel as cited in Spring's (2016) article, discovered three main motivations on the part of prisoners (a) to feel better themselves, (b) to get a job when released, and (c) to improve their skills in order to obtain a job or pursue additional educational training. The percentage of students with whom these motivations were popular depended on the nature of the programs in which they participated. For example, 49.1% of students in academic programs (including GED programs) were primarily motivated to attend GED programs in order to feel better about themselves, while only 29.1% were concerned about getting a job. On the other hand, Tewksbury and Stengel discovered that 53% of incarcerated vocational students were more interested in getting a job. The results of the study revealed that 38.5% among all students were primarily motivated to feel better about themselves. A total of 35.2% of the students were primarily motivated by the opportunity of receiving a job upon release. Incarcerated prisoners' reasons for obtaining education in prisons has been motivated by self-perceptions, obtaining and job and expanding job opportunities and changing the trajectory of their lives. Teacher qualities have also played a role in influencing incarcerated inmates in considering enrollment in GED programs (Spring, 2016).

**Teacher qualities.** Teacher qualities have been noted to attract and motivate incarcerated inmates to enroll in GED or other educational programs. Tewksbury and Stengel, as referenced by Spring (2016), contained older participants compared to the participants in Lowry's et al (2016) study with samples of an average age of mid to low 20's and early 40's respectively. There were important differences between the participants' perspective regarding instructor quality (Lowry et al., 2016). Lowry's et al sample reported that instructor support accounted for more of their academic motivation than any other variable (with the exception of peer support); meanwhile, 88.4% Lie's et al. sample reported that teachers and instructors were 'very helpful.' Thus, the subjects in both the Lowry's et al. study and the Lie's et al study agreed that teachers are the most important, or among the most important variables in the success of the overall educational enterprise. In Lie's et al. study, students in both the academic and vocational tracks nominated teachers as being more helpful than any other component of instruction, including textbooks, computers, and libraries.

The academic and vocational students' expressed gratitude to their teachers during graduation ceremonies is evidence that incarcerated prisoners acknowledge the support and guidance prison education staff provided for them. They do not require motivation from their teachers to achieve but they do thank their teachers for providing them with a reason to be motivated. The belief and sincere caring elicited by the teachers supports the incarcerated prisoner to develop self-efficacy and self-esteem to believe in themselves and the vision they have for themselves once released from prison (Lowry et al., 2016) Interestingly, Justice and Meares (2014) reached conclusions that were similar

to those of Lie's et al study (2014) despite the fact that Justice and Meares (2014) derived their results from a sample (N=467) of offenders in Norway. While Tewksbury and Stengel according to Spring (2016) posed a single, open-ended question to their subjects, Manger et al. (2010) as cited by Tewksbury and Stengel in Spring's article (2016) administered a 15-question scale to their sample from which they later derived, through content analysis, three main motivations for prisoners to acquire educational training: (a) to prepare for life at release, (b) for social reasons and reasons unique to the prison context, and (c) to acquire knowledge and skills. Offenders' basic motivations for acquiring education thus seem to be fairly consistent across borders.

Offenders are mainly motivated by (a) feeling better themselves, (b) getting a job when released, and (c) improving their skills in order to obtain a job or pursue additional educational training (Manger et al., as cited in Tewksbury & Stengel, 2016). Tewksbury and Stengel, (2016) found that teachers were perceived as the most important variables in educational success; they made no effort to determine the relationships between students' academic motivation, academic outcomes, and perceptions of instructional quality. Lowry et al. and Lie et al. called attention to the importance of motivation, and the role of the teacher in stoking motivation, in successful correctional education programs.

**Teaching strategies for incarcerated GED inmates.** It is a professional necessity, for teachers to formulate the best teaching strategies in the different GED programs, for learners to effectively comprehend the subjects or topics taught per the curriculum. Some of the strategies that can be used include; putting emphasis on the concept of reading, for pragmatic or functional reasons. Prisoners relate to reading

rationale that is tangible, concrete and aligned to where they perceive themselves transitioning upon release from prison. Learning content and skills that are anchored in real world applications have enabled a student to retrieve new information and effectively respond to different societal needs and the different demands at the workplace According to Martin, Martin and Southworth, (2015), planning for an effective classroom instruction is paramount. In adult classrooms, effective instruction occurs when students are able to connect instruction to their personal experiences and most importantly to jobs in their communities (Virginia Department of Corrections-Correctional Education Operating Policy 601.5, 2018c). A GED certificate as a high school diploma ensures that completers are, not only competitive with high school graduates in the job market, college ready to train for employment requiring post-secondary training (Stronge, 2018).

Students rely on teachers while learning GED program in which teachers focus on teaching skills and knowledge to the students so they can be able to pass the GED test. Some of the best teaching strategies for teachers to use in GED programs include using performance level descriptors, watching GED testing service webinars, giving students feedback on their GED, formulating reading and writing templates for constructed responses, helping students write high scoring responses, focusing on the skills that have highest impact on preparation and sharing the basic rules to write an extended response (ACE, 2018; Brinkley-Etzkorn & Ishitani, 2016). Each student must also have a unique individualized learning plan based on their instructional skills and knowledge level.

The learning plan for each student who is attempting to pass the GED should be individualized and based on assessment of baseline reading, writing and math skills

(Reed et al., 2017). Using personal learning plans (PLPs) to shape the learning activities of students are also effective as assessment data allow the teacher to design individualized instruction for students in addition teachers can use these data while instructing students about GED test skills such as reading for comprehension of the material, deepening critical thinking skills and applying reading skills to potential job or life situations once transitioned outside the prison (Reed et al., 2017). Therefore, important strategies include identification of the gaps in the students' skills, development of the plans that address those gaps are important factors in supporting student learning related to the GED, and applying the skills to their personal goals (Reed et al., 2017).

Assessing and screening incarcerated inmates' reading and writing levels is important to determine individual plans for learning and progress. Researchers indicated that academic ability in reading and writing skill areas accounts for inmates' progress academically. Academic skills alone are not the only variable found to influence performance; self-efficacy or belief in one's ability to engage in a skill such as reading or writing has also been found to influence inmate's performance on assessments. Jones et al. (2012) cited by Roth, Asbjornsen, and Manger (2016) probed the Reading and Writing Self-Efficacy Scale of incarcerated adults. They examined whether performance of reading and spelling tests provided an explanation for individual differences in the participants' efficacy beliefs in reading and writing. In the study, 600 subjects rated their self-efficacy beliefs in reading and writing, and 92 of them were also chosen for a reading and spelling test. The results revealed that education level and test performance accounted for 36.9 % (reading) and 34.9 % (spelling) of the statistical variance in reading

self-efficacy and writing self-efficacy. The results of the self-efficacy ratings were that those inmates who rated themselves lower on the self-efficacy scale also scaled lower on the performance of the academic tests. The results indicated that the assessment of self-efficacy in reading and writing needed to be enclosed in a procedure to screen reading and spelling difficulties.

Essential skills for passing the GED test include students' ability to read and comprehend a variety of material and genres. Prisoners enrolled in adult education classes have found it difficult to read fluently and comprehend what they read. In the article "Dyslexia SPELD Foundation" (2014), the author indicated that adults who wrestle with reading have trouble decoding and recognizing words, thus resulting in comprehension problems as well. One best practice teacher can use to support the reader is pairing non-reading students with a reading specialist or a tutor (Dyslexia SPELD Foundation, 2014).

The use of proper materials is important to motivate, engage and support the reader in experiencing reading success as they develop reading skills. Some strategies to scaffold the learning include using high interest low-level materials combined with the paired partner reading has been demonstrated to improve reading fluency and comprehension scores. High interest low level materials on a reader's level are motivating to read whether the individual is a child or adult (Dyslexia SPELD Foundation, 2014). Students need to read books that they are interested in and specifically books that will fulfil a personal need that the incarcerated inmate may have



such as obtaining a job once released, leisure and recreation reading, or for academic success (Dyslexia SPELD Foundation, 2014).

Specific reading strategies to facilitate comprehension include breaking reading into chunks, discontinuing reading when tired, connecting pictures, graphs, and charts to the reading material, reading and re-reading complex materials, reading slowly, reading for specifics (reading every word is not necessary), underlining key words to help your focus, learning new and unfamiliar words by saying and using them until they become automatic, and skimming and scanning for main ideas are other reading strategies that have been established as evidence based practice that support reading growth (Dyslexia SPELD Foundation, 2014). Skimming involves finding out what to expect about the reading material assigned by reading titles, reading for main ideas by studying headings and subheadings, comprehending that words in italics or bold print and repeated words are important, as well as understanding the first sentence in a paragraph introduces the main idea of the paragraph (Dyslexia SPELD Foundation, 2014). Reading and writing are two content areas that adult students need to be competent in to pass all subtests of GED test (math, science, social studies, and language which includes reading). All subtests of the GED are dependent on the examinee's ability to read, comprehend, and write which includes mathematics (word problems) and the language subtest. On the language test, examinees are expected to respond to an extended writing prompt which also involves reading and comprehension (GED Testing Services, 2018).

Specific strategies to support writing and passing the GED writing portion of the exam are critical for teachers to know and apply with their students. Teachers should

provide writing time to respond to writing prompts with a scaffolded structure and provide feedback to the learner in order for the learner to meet the minimum scoring criteria. Teachers need to provide specific and clear feedback so that the student understands exactly what needs to be accomplished to meet the criteria (Reed et.al, 2017). Writing strategies are quite effective to enhance students' writing abilities. There are also learning strategies that support the learner to acquire, store and express themselves effectively in writing. On the language portion of the GED test, the essay portion is identified as the extended response. Examinees are only given 45 minutes to respond to a writing prompt. Evidence based writing guidelines include: (a) plan (b) produce and (c) proofread. It is also suggested by (whom) to spend a total of 10 minutes on the writing plan and 30 minutes on writing the essay (American Council on Education (ACE), 2018). For best practice, the writing response should be a five-paragraph essay. After writing the essay, students are encouraged to spend only five minutes reading and re-reading the essay. Reviewing the essay includes making necessary changes and improvements. On the GED writing test, the essay is constructed on a computer so proofreading can be done relatively quickly (ACE, 2018). In summary, the "GED Reading and Writing" guidelines list the following strategies for preparing for the Language Arts and Reading Comprehension GED test:

1. Before reading the passages, read the questions. By doing so one will get a better idea of what to look for in the passages.

2. It is important to comprehend what the question is asking. Understanding literary vocabulary words before taking the GED reading comprehension test will help.
3. To help focus, practice reading over the entire text. While reading look for main idea, the author's intent, implicit (implied meaning) and explicit (exact meaning) language, indirect reference to a historical event or person or allusion, implied feeling or association that accompanies a certain word (connotation), and the exact definition of the word (denotation).

It is important to familiarize one's self with literary words and ideas before taking the language arts GED test and understand how the terms are used in sentences before taking the reading portion of the GED test. For best practice, the more times an individual practice taking the test the better he/she will understand the test and the timing. In correctional schools, not only are GED practice resources located in the classroom, materials are also found in the school library, which are available to all prisoners during their scheduled library time (ACE,2018).

**Teaching social skill development for incarcerated GED inmates.** Promoting reading as a learning strategy not only reinforce the concepts of the eight strategies listed in the previous paragraph, reading also promotes the development of social skills (Alexis, 2014). According to Alexis (2014) social skills encourage good listening skills and increase reading comprehension. Social skill training advances a higher-level language skill. Language skills such as inferencing, predicting, cause/effect, etc. are test questions on the Language GED subtest. Because of the social skills correlated with social skills

and reading comprehension, social skills instruction needs to be incorporated into the curriculum to promote a sense of improved self-efficacy. To enumerate, the improvement of language skills as a result of social skills development mitigate students' confidence in themselves which certainly improves their chances of finding employment (Alexis, 2014).

**Developing self-efficacy for incarcerated GED inmates.** The GED correctional education teachers should build self-efficacy in their students. This is especially important in adult prison schools. Incarcerated adults without a high school or GED often maintain no positive belief in their ability to learn and succeed. They have no faith in their capacity to earn a GED (VDOC-DCE, 2017b). Therefore, correctional education teachers are obligated to build self-efficacy in the incarcerated inmates studying for the GED to build confidence in their students so they will believe in their abilities as they develop and understand that their learning and skills will enable them to pass the GED. Bandura, as cited in Moustakas (1994), defined self-efficacy as "one's belief in the ability to influence events that affect one's control over life and over the way these events are experienced (Buchanan, 2016, p. 30). Bandura (1994 as cited in Buchanan, 2016) stated that there are four ways to build self- efficacy:

1. Experiences of mastery or in other words experiencing self-efficacy first hand.  
Your effort is dedicated to experimenting with challenging but realistic goals as well as accepting the satisfaction of achieving those goals.

2. *Social Modeling* which is selecting role models to reveal their self-efficacy. The expectation is that the role model will demonstrate success with reaching their goals despite hardships and difficulties.
3. *Social Persuasion* is locating the proper mentor. Social persuasion is having others shape one's self-efficacy by providing occasions for proficient experiences in a safe and purposeful fashion as opposed to social modeling which is surveillance of a self-efficacy role model.
4. *States of Physiology* influence our interpretation of a physical state, emotions, and moods. An example is how we react when failure is experienced. Based on the degree of our belief, self-efficacy influences our functioning (Bandura, 1994 as cited in Buchanan 2016, p. 30).

Cognitive, motivational, emotional, and decisional are four categories of how our functioning can be expressed (Bandura, 1994 as cited in Buchanan, 2016). In cognitive functioning, thinking is optimistic or pessimistic. Believing in the value of motivation, of course, is motivational. When people are emotional, self-efficacy is the belief that they can bounce back from a highly emotional state and in a decisional functioning state, self-efficacy means that we can choose how we experience situations (Bandura, 1994 as cited by Buchanan, 2016). In conclusion, Bandura expressed people can truly recognize our ability to shape the world when we master our thoughts, motivations, emotions, and decisions. Therefore, when teachers are able to do likewise only then are they able to build their own self-efficacy. (Buchanan, 2016).

**Providing resources to support incarcerated inmates' learning.** To augment learning skills, reading comprehension, and social skills development, every classroom should contain a library (Brinkley-Etzkorn & Ishitani, 2016). The classroom library should be promoting the culture of reading of the many pieces of literature from the different genres. In so doing, students will have the resources to make personal and general connections that are vital to their lives for the information retrieved while reading. Moreover, the teacher needs to establish allotted and protected time for reading. The lack of reading time is a contributor to developing comprehension and fluency. Silent reading time allows the reader to make meaning and connections while they are reading which should be supported and scaffolded by the teacher (Brinkley-Etzkorn & Ishitani, 2016). Most students are aligned to the sentiment of lack of reading time. Therefore, it is important that a teacher's classroom provides a favorable space where students can rest while reading in silence. Providing students' space where they can read in silence will help the students develop concentration along with the stamina that is needed for one to pay attention to passages being read during the examination Brinkley-(Etzkorn & Ishitani, 2016).

Providing information on the need for students to adjust their scope of understanding in the process of approaching the different texts is another important function that a classroom library can provide for students (Brinkley-Etzkorn & Ishitani, 2016). Applying language conventions, structure, and figurative is vital to ensure that the above is realized. Among other many strategies that may be employed, it is also important for a teacher to encourage his or students to conduct formidable research.

Through using resources that are in hard-copy or electronic formats, they should begin with topics that are on current issues or those that suite their interests. Evaluation and synthesis of data from the different resources will be developed through research (Brinkley-Etzhorn & Ishitani, 2016).

Allocating space in the classroom for a library does not only offer students the opportunity to have resources readily available to enhance instruction but to aid teachers with conducting research for immediate problem solving in the classroom. According to O'Byrne (2016) sooner or later teachers are presented with challenges or problems to solve during the course of their instruction. In an effort to address these challenges and seek resolutions to their problems, some teachers will seek help and advice from experts or colleagues. However, O'Byrne (2016) stated that the best teachers will conduct their own investigations or research. To restate, teachers who (a) identify the problem, (b) analyze the data, and (c) formulate a resolution based on research and analyzation of the the problem engage in best practices (O'Byrne, 2016). Thus, a classroom library provides opportunities for students to develop reading and critical thinking and problem-solving skills thereby supporting students and teachers to engage in a rich environment that supports the development of reading (O'Byrne, 2016).

### **Summary**

The purpose of this literature review was to establish the history of education programs and services, such as the GED, with inmates in correctional facilities including the perceived effectiveness of those programs and the construction and delivery of those programs to benefit the incarcerated population. In this literature review I provided a

brief history of GED, Pell Grants and offender access to education, rationale behind the initiation of educational prison programs, the composition of the prison population, role of the criminal education system in educating citizens, prison education options and prisoners' perception towards education and teaching staff. Moreover, I discussed the challenges faced by education enrollment in prison programs, characteristics of GED programs, reforms in GED Program, quantification of success of GED programs, benefits of provision of Higher Education in prison, and roadblocks to effective GED educational programs. I synthesized the literature to establish the state of education and obtaining a GED for the incarcerated inmate.

This literature review began by focusing on the education prisoners of war to ensure that veterans of WWII had access to higher education and earned credit for informal education. The US was the leading country to offer such a support and the program's scope was extended to civilians in 1952 (Goldin, 1999). The objective of such educational programs beginning with the GED was to reduce violence in prisons and ensure that offenders did not re-offend (Pompoco et al., 2017). Several parameters were also defined and statistical techniques were applied to examine the impact of such educational programs on violence and if the behavior of prisoners improved. Thus, it was imperative to educate offenders and it was made possible through Pell grants offered in the 1960's (Ubah, 2004). It was aimed at covering education costs for poor and offenders. It is important to note that the proportion of minorities in prisons has remained than higher than Whites despite the fact that Blacks or other minorities formed a small proportion of population in almost all states in which these studies were conducted. The



researchers on violence and reformation of offenders have found that educational programs such as GED proved to be successful. In educating and reducing prison violence both inside and outside the prison following release (Sperber, Latessa, & Makarios, 2013) Prisoners also have a positive perception regarding these educational programs and even if some prisoners have a negative perception at the initiation of the program, their attitude changes by the end of their prison term of the educational program to one that is more positive (Sperber, Latessa, & Makarios, 2013).

In closing, prisoners' positive perception regarding education are fueled by the instruction provided by their teachers. As a school principal in more than one adult school, students often openly praise their teachers and provide positive feedback to school leaders in the prison facility about how teachers make a difference in their lives. During graduation, their teachers are their heroes. The graduates give them the major credit. When the graduates of the GED program are reminded that receiving the GED is work that led to their success, they are sometimes able to accept this notion if they have developed the sense of self-efficacy for them to acknowledge their hard work and realize they were responsible for their achievements.

### Chapter 3: Research Method

The purpose of this qualitative case study was to understand correctional staff members' perceptions of what constitutes successful GED programs in Virginia. In this study, a qualitative methodology was used to explore the perceptions of participants relative to the GED program within the DOC-DCE. An open-ended survey issued to the participants was the method of data collection for this qualitative study.

#### **Research Design and Rationale**

A qualitative case study design was chosen as appropriate methodology for this study because of (a) the absence of quantitative instruments measuring teacher-student interaction specifically designed for the incarcerated learner population and (b) the greater likelihood that a qualitative approach could uncover rich explanations of teacher-student interaction phenomena. Qualitative methodology was used to address a gap in the existing literature on incarcerated GED programs and a gap in the quantitative instrumentation of teacher-student interactions in the incarcerated environment. The research design for this qualitative case study was a way of investigating the topic to gain a deeper understanding of the phenomenon of the study using methods to examine and interpret patterns in written or textual data. Case study is a qualitative design researchers use to look at individuals or situations to understand the experience or behavior of the individuals; case studies make use of unstructured observations and interviews (Samo & Mikulec 2018). To align with the chosen design and approach, I formulated my research question beginning with "how." Case studies typically answer *how* or *why* questions. My

research question was the following: How do correctional staff members of incarcerated GED students perceive educational success?

To ensure that a qualitative case study was the most appropriate for this research study, I considered and rejected other qualitative designs such as narrative, phenomenology, grounded theory, and ethnography. A narrative design was not appropriate because my intention was not to intertwine a sequence of events from one or two events to create a cohesive story. A phenomenological design was not appropriate because I sought teachers' perceptions related to the efficacy of an education program (see Sauro, 2015). Grounded theory is needed when cyclical and systematic data collection and analysis processes are used to explain the actions of people to develop a theory (Yin, 2014), which was not appropriate for this study because I did not build theories. Rather, I explored a central phenomenon to understand the nature of that phenomenon (see Merriam, 2009; Yin, 2014). Because I did not have long-term access to participants, nor were the participants considered a culture-sharing group, meaning having "shared behaviors, beliefs, and language" (Creswell, 2012, p. 469), ethnography was not appropriate. Finally, because I did the research design and approach for this qualitative research study utilizing a case study design to investigate the central phenomenon. A case study is a design used to gain an in-depth understanding of "one setting, or a single subject, a single depository of documents, or one particular event" (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007, p. 59).

Qualitative methodology was chosen for this study because of (a) the absence of quantitative instruments measuring teacher-student interaction specifically designed for

the incarcerated learner population and (b) the greater likelihood that qualitative means could uncover rich explanations of teacher-student interaction phenomena that have been absent from Nally, Lockwood, Ho, and Knutson (2014) and other quantitative studies on the topic. Qualitative methodology addressed a gap in the existing literature on incarcerated GED programs and a gap in the quantitative instrumentation of teacher-student interactions in the incarcerated environment. According to Yin (2018), a descriptive case study design is appropriate to provide a contextual analysis of a limited number of events or conditions.

### **Role of the Researcher**

I am an administrator of one of the GED programs that I studied. As a result, I was the sole person in charge in a power relationship with some of the potential participants in the study. According to Yin (2018), being in a power relationship with a participant does not itself create an ethical problem; ethical problems arise when there is some prospect of a person with power abusing that power, for example by acting adversely on the basis of participant's statements.

Although I am an administrator, it was not in my direct power to terminate GED teachers or micromanage their instruction of offenders, and neither the teachers nor I are empowered to control an offender's GED performance in a testing situation. As a school administrator, I have no substantive power over how teachers decide to do their jobs as long as they operate according to the school instructional policies. Also, teachers have no power over whether students decide to take advantage of the school program instructional

model. I did not hold power over the participants who were not sanctioned by central administration.

My role in the prison hierarchy is a humble one. I do not control, either formally or informally, participants' rights, benefits, or lives; my only responsibility is to tailor the delivery of GED education. I cannot decide based on data provided by the participants who are good correctional staff members and who are not. Participants may have perceived their participation in the study as less than voluntary and may have felt compelled to offer information that they thought was desired by me rather than expressing their perceptions freely. I mitigated this risk with the use of informed consent. Participants were told in writing of their right to terminate their participation at any time without consequence.

## **Methodology**

### **Participant Selection**

The chosen participants in the study were correctional educational staff employed by the VDOC-DCE. A total of 55 correctional staff members were invited to participate in the study from multiple adult correctional facilities and jails across the state of Virginia. The invited staff members were requested to participate in the study, but only nine participated. The participants are teachers certified by the Virginia Department of Education. I confirmed prior to inviting the participants that they were employees of the DOC-DOE agency and were mandated to provide instruction based on GED instruction operational policies. Because I work for the same agency as the participants, I used using interagency e-mail to contact them.

### **Sampling Strategy and Justification for Number of Participants**

In a purposive sample, the participants are recruited based on availability and selection criteria (Etikan, Musa, & Alkassim, 2016). Sampling for this study was nonprobability sampling. Critical sampling was used in the selection of participants. The criteria to recruit the participants included correctional staff members who worked as teachers in correctional education who help offenders enrolled in correctional school to earn their GED by providing GED instruction. All participants were mandated to use the GED curriculum and educational resources outlined in the educational operations policy of the correctional school system. The nine participants met the criteria.

### **Instrumentation**

In a qualitative case study, the main instrument is the researcher who uses an interview protocol (Englander, 2012). This study included open-ended qualitative survey questions to draw out explanations and experiences from the participants. The survey protocol included nine guiding survey questions (Appendix B). I also conducted informal follow-up interviews with five participants.

### **Procedures for Recruitment, Participation, and Data Collection**

**Procedure for recruitment.** The participants were purposefully selected because they were correctional education staff members who were employed by the DOC-DCE. Using my Walden e-mail, I sent a preliminary letter of request to the 55 prospective participants asking them whether they would be interested in participating in a research study about their perception of the effectiveness of GED programs in correctional facilities. Following a response from the potential participants in the study by e-mail, I e-

mailed a letter of consent to all participants using their personal e-mail address. I made a request for their personal e-mail address through the preliminary letters I sent on their work e-mail. The letter of consent emailed also contained a copy of the survey. The potential participants were advised that a returned completed survey would be accepted as their confirmed consent to be a participant in the study. Prior to forwarding the preliminary letter of request to potential participants, I obtained approval for the recruitment procedure from Walden University's institutional review board (IRB).

**Participation.** To secure approval for data collection within VDOC-DCE, I submitted a Request to Conduct Research application to the director of assessment and accountability. I obtained Walden University IRB approval (#04-16-15-0338986) and solicited correctional teachers to volunteer to participate. I obtained an electronically signed letter of consent from each participant who participated in the study in March 2016.

**Data collection.** Data were collected from nine correctional education staff members. All nine participants received a survey. Following the receipt of a completed survey by all nine participants, I conducted informal follow-up interviews with five correctional education staff members in four schools that I supervised.

**Survey.** Data collection was conducted in the form of surveys issued to each correctional staff member in the study. Correctional staff members had the opportunity to complete the survey in a private setting. The survey was designed to be completed in 30-45 minutes. At any time during the completion of the survey, the participants had the choice to stop and not submit the survey. Once all surveys were collected, I recorded

patterns of the data in a journal and retained the data in a locked cabinet to which only I had access.

*Survey questions.* The study began with survey questions to quickly gather a large amount of data from a diverse population. This method provided a means of anonymity that allowed all teachers and administrators in the school district to be invited to participate. Lodico, Spaulding, and Voegtle (2010) noted the purpose of a survey is to “gather opinions, beliefs, or perceptions about a current issue for a large group of people” (p. 199). Bradburn, Sudman, and Wansink (2015) provided clear guidelines as to the development of a survey. It was essential to have a clear understanding as to the research question while formulating each specific item of the questionnaire. The survey design process included time for reflection and to repeatedly question the inclusion of each item. Items were vetted for ambiguous wording, questions that might cause participants to feel threatened, clear vocabulary, and anything that would make the task more difficult for the participant. When the instrument was complete it was reviewed to correct the sequence of each question. Bradburn et al. (2015) compared the order of a survey to the “flow” of an interview or the purposeful transitioning in a paper. The order of the items can have an impact on the participants’ responses.

The researcher-developed survey was designed to gather demographic information about the participants and data about teachers’ perceptions about students with academic disabilities versus emotional disabilities in their general education classroom. While the majority of the questions were closed-ended, a few open-ended questions were included to gather more in-depth information regarding how participants



define key terms and what role they believed administrators should play in the inclusion of students with ED (Bradburn et al., 2015).

Prior to IRB approval, I convened an expert panel of one local education expert and three counseling professionals to review the survey. The education expert has a background in literacy instruction and has strengths in the area of questioning. The three counseling professionals have worked with students with emotional disabilities for over 20 years each. All four have worked for, or in collaboration with, the district for over 15 years each. Their feedback was used to verify the alignment of the survey and the research questions; their feedback was incorporated into the final survey. These experts were asked to respond to the survey in terms of clarity, leading or biased questions, and focus to the research questions. Questions and follow-up probes were refined based on feedback from the expert panel to ensure efficiency and effectiveness in gathering the widest range of information possible. None of these professionals were involved as participants in the research project.

These data allowed me to create a baseline understanding of teachers' perceptions about the academic, behavioral, and social success of students with emotional disabilities, versus academic disabilities, in their classroom. Additionally, I collected information about their professional development and prior training, their knowledge of the structures in the school and district that support or hinder inclusion of students with ED, and their administrative needs. The survey was developed based on the three research questions.

**Data collection method.** While the survey allowed for the collection of a large amount of data in a short amount of time, it did not allow for the opportunity to interact

with participants during the data collection. The final method of data collection was semi-structured interviews with four special education teachers, four general education teachers, and four administrators. These interviews offered an opportunity to interact with participants during the data collection process. The data did not have to be limited to typed-in responses, but could be gathered in a collaborative, interactive setting. The researcher conducted the study using a survey. Informal interviewing was conducted as a follow-up to the completion of the survey; open-ended questions were used in the survey. The participants were surveyed about their perceptions of the GED program in correctional education.

### **Data Analysis**

In this study, the emphasis was to invariably explicate a phenomenon: The phenomenon was the object of the investigation to evaluate the effectiveness of a GED program. Therefore, the real-life situation of this study answered the research question of how correctional staff members of incarcerated GED students perceive educational success. An inductive approach analysis was used to focus on the data and condense the raw data to be brief and easy to understand. The inductive approach gave a framework of basic structures or processes that were evident in raw data. The approach was simple and provided straight forward findings. In other words, to clarify, the method was less complicated. The research question of the study was limited to general examinations of successful versus unsuccessful GED programs; no specific coding categories (such as the Gostisha et al., 2014 components of successful learning) was presupposed by being inserted into the research question. Consequently, it was expected that the process of data

collection and analysis would reveal offenders' genuine, unmediated experiences, insights, and perspectives about successful and unsuccessful GED programs from the perspective of their teachers. Correctional education staff members are not only mandated to provide instruction for their students, they also establish an instructional starting place for each student as they are enrolled in school. Students provide this information for teachers by completing a survey. Students' instruction is based on the goals and objectives of their personal learning plan which students establish and teachers implement.

The qualitative protocol for the study consisted of open-ended survey questions for participants based on the qualitative case study research design. The qualitative responses were organized and presented in a raw form under themes as included in the objectives and research questions. Respondents were assigned codes such as T1 for teacher one to T9 for teacher nine. After sorting and organizing the responses according to themes, the study used quotes to cite the response of each respondent as well as enrich the study findings. The study ensured confidentiality and secrecy by not disclosing the names of respondents and referred to all by a masculine character and it became quite difficult to identify whose response was included in the quotes.

### **Trustworthiness**

#### **Managing Threats to Validity**

Researcher bias was inevitable but possible to mitigate through an open acknowledgement of its existence (Dane, 2010). My bias stemmed from my involvement at the institution. As the administrator of the GED program currently in use, bias towards

determining positive effects of the program existed. On the other hand, as an administrator dedicated to finding the best means for educating the offenders under my care, bias exists towards understanding exactly what the data reveals. In order to minimize any negative effects of biases, peer debriefing, member checking, and journaling were utilized.

**Journaling.** Before collecting data, I engaged in a journaling exercise designed to increase what Moustakas (1994) called *epoche*, or a state of bias reduction and openness to whatever participants say. I also used a journal to write down both critiques and affirmations of the GED program from my own perspective, thereby achieving a state of greater introspection and knowledge of my own viewpoints. According to Moustakas, writing down perceptions and feelings is a way to be able to set them aside and achieve participant-focus during research.

**Peer debriefing.** I employed a peer de-briefer to strengthen the credibility of the study, as suggested by Hays and Singh (2011). The role of the peer de-briefer was to provide feedback, challenge assumptions, detect problems, and examine transcripts and coding, all with the purpose of improving the study. Peer debriefing took place by emailing a prison non-teaching staff who worked in education (in a position analogous to my own) the gathered data and allowing the de-briefer to reach conclusions about how the data can be coded.

The peer de-briefer was not given any information about the research objectives or any data other than the raw survey transcripts. I iterated the research again to achieve coherence with other themes that depicted non- agreement with my coded themes.

Moreover, I did not engage in any communication with the peer de-briefer during his or her process of analysis, so as not to impose bias on the process. Once the debriefing was complete, I compared the results with my own analysis and report on any important differences between the de-briefer's coding and my own in the body of the completed thesis.

**Member checking.** After coding the interview data and completing peer debriefing, I met individual participants in order to describe major themes that emerged from their surveys to analyze if they agreed that these themes were consistent with what meant to be communicated and feedback was also offered (member checking and feedback, as discussed by Hesse-Biber, 2017). This approach was consistent with what is known as the spiral of qualitative research, in which the accuracy of coding is collaborative (Saldana, 2015). Participants had one opportunity to register concerns about the use of their narratives; if the concerns register a high degree of dissent from my coding, note was made of the dissenting participants' perspectives within the body of the thesis and the peer de-briefer was contacted in order to furnish another layer of interpretation.

### **Ethical Procedures**

Overall, the safety, well-being, and confidentiality of each participant were protected during the duration of the study. Prior to undertaking the research, I obtained permission from Walden Institutional Review Board (IRB) to collect data from the participants. This research study had a low risk level to participants, the surveys were completed in private and there were no demographics that enabled me to identify the

participants. Furthermore, although I was employed by the same agency as the participants, the participants completed the survey outside of business hours on their own time. Participation was voluntary. If a potential participant decided not to participate, he or she had the option of not returning the consent by not completing the survey which was attached to the letter of consent. The participants were simply known as participant one through nine (participant 1, 2, 3, etc.) and a number was assigned to each participant in the order that the completed survey was returned. Only I have knowledge of the true identities of each participant within this study.

I forwarded an email to participants on their agency email address inviting them to participate in the study. In the preliminary letter of request, I advised the participants to forward their personal email address to me if they wished to participate in the study. I informed the participants that I did not have permission for them to participate in the study during work hours. I reiterated in the initial invite that the study was voluntary. I also discussed the purpose of the study and advised that I was available to address any questions or concerns. Following the receipt of personal email address, as requested in the preliminary letter of request, I forwarded a letter of consent with the attached survey questions to the participants' personal email addresses. I outlined the purpose of the study and the participants' rights to withdraw from the study at any time in the letter of consent and I also reiterated the protection of the participants confidentially again in the consent.

In addition, all electronic data collected from each participant is stored in password-protected, encrypted files on my home computer. Encrypting the files ensured confidentiality, that in the unlikely event that my computer was lost or stolen, data were

coded in a manner that any third party will not be able to read the data. All non-electronic data are stored securely in a locked desk located within my home. I will store these data for five years, per Walden University protocol, and then destroy all electronic and non-electronic data.

### **Summary**

A qualitative research case study design was chosen for this study. The research question of the study is a “How” question. Case studies generally answers “How” research questions. Data were collected from nine correctional education staff members across the state of Virginia. The participants completed survey questions regarding the phenomenon of the study by informal follow-up interviews. My connection to the participants was carefully considered prior to inviting them to participate in the study. I clarified that my connection to the participants was not a threat to their confidentiality nor their positions with the agency of the program that they were evaluating with the responses to the survey questions.

In Chapter 4, I will review the purpose of the research question as well as engage in written discussion regarding data collection and data analysis. This chapter will also include specific demographic and background data about the participants. Finally, the results of the data collection will be presented in detail to include credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability of the results.

## Chapter 4: Results

The purpose of this qualitative study was to understand correctional staff members' perceptions of why some GED programs might be more effective than others. The research question implanted used to guide the study was the following: How do correctional staff members of incarcerated GED students perceive educational success? Chapter 4 includes the overview, setting, data collection, data analysis, results, evidence of trustworthiness, and a summary. The overview provides a brief introduction, including purpose and research questions. The setting section provides a description of the organizational or personal conditions that influenced the study participants and may have affected the results. , including the participants' demographics. The data collection section presents the number of participants and the location, frequency, and duration of the data collection process. This section also addresses the problems that emerged during the data collection process, the ways in which the data were recorded, the variations that were in the data collection process, and the unusual circumstances that occurred during the process. The data analysis section includes a description of the codes, categories, and themes that resulted from the data analysis. The results address each survey question and include supportive data on each finding. The evidence of trustworthiness section provides information indicating that the study was free of any bias throughout all its stages. Lastly, the summary section provides answers to the research question and a synopsis of the chapter.



## Setting

The setting for this study was the VDOC-DCE. There are 38 adult correctional facilities in the state of Virginia; 25 are major correctional facilities with adult schools serving a general population of 1,000 to 1,200 offenders, and 13 are minor correctional facilities. In the major facilities, each school is assigned a principal, a program support technician or office manager, and a librarian. There are three to four academic teachers and CTE or vocational teachers, depending on the offender population, in one major adult correctional facility. There is also one major receiving center. The receiving center receives intakes of the offenders directly from the courts or from the local jails. There are also smaller versions of the receiving center in at least two other major correctional facilities for the purpose of reducing overcrowding in the institution. Most incarcerated intakes are transferred from jails into the correctional facilities. Educational services are provided to intakes in the receiving centers in the form of initial educational standardized testing. The Test of Basic Adult Education is administered to intake offenders to determine their educational functioning levels. The results of this test provide the receiving teachers with current grade functioning levels of offenders who are assigned to a main institution and enrolled in school.

The receiving center staff also classify the security level of the offender, which determines the institution or facility where he or she will be assigned. Security level is important because offenders sometimes have conflicts with each other, and there are threats from outside of the educational facility. The major security levels are classified as 1 through 6. The lower the number, the lower the security level of the offender.

Correctional education staff members are assigned offenders to teach if they are eligible for school, meaning they do not have a high school diploma or GED. Offenders without an HSD or GED are required by law to be enrolled in school; otherwise the offender will not be able to attend the correctional facility. Offenders are not required to be enrolled in vocational programs, but they can attend a vocational program if they submit a request and if they meet the academic prerequisite for the program, which is not necessarily a high school diploma. Generally, the offenders are required to have functional language and math scores, which vary across vocational programs (VDOC-DCE, 2018).

Of the 38 correctional facilities, there are 11 correctional centers or work units that include at least two community corrections facilities. Jails are also considered a part of the VDOC-DCE correctional system. These facilities enjoy the facility of schools in which educational services regarding the treatment of the offenders at these correctional schools are a smaller scale than they are in the major institutions. On average, these correctional education programs have one academic teacher and one vocational program depending on the size of the facility. Some schools have a larger population than others. Correctional centers, work units, community corrections, and jails all provide adult educational services similar to the major institution. GED testing is administered to offenders in all of the correctional facilities in the state of Virginia (VDOC-DCE, 2017b).

The 55 correctional education staff members identified by accessing the corrections staff database were sent an e-mail containing an invitation to participate in the study (Appendix A). The initial number of correctional education staff members who agreed to participate was 19. However, the sample was reduced to nine participants

because only nine completed the survey. Creswell (2012) suggested that only a few cases are necessary in qualitative research studies; having nine case study participants allowed me to gather in-depth, rich data.

### **Data Collection**

The data were collected in the form of surveys that were issued to every correctional staff member in the study. These survey forms were distributed to each of the nine participants and their responses were gathered. I e-mailed a preliminary letter of request to participate to 55 potential participants (correctional staff members) using their work e-mail addresses. Participants were not allowed to complete the survey using business e-mail addresses. The number of participants who responded to my initial request was 19. Each of these received the consent letter and survey via their personal e-mails, but only nine completed the survey. Incomplete surveys were not included in the data analysis. The average time that it took to complete the survey was 20 minutes. The participants were asked to mention the time to complete survey, which enabled me to calculate the average time. The time to complete the survey was an important consideration during data analysis. The background of each participant is presented in Table 1.

Table 1

*Participants' Background*

Participant number	Ethnic background	Gender	Age	Work experience
1	African American	Male	22	Teacher at Virginia Department of Corrections-Department of Correctional Education
2	African American	Female	24	Teacher at Virginia Department of Corrections-Department of Correctional Education
3	White	Male	45	Teacher at Virginia Department of Corrections-Department of Correctional Education
4	White	Female	44	Teacher at Virginia Department of Corrections-Department of Correctional Education
5	White	Female	32	Teacher at Virginia Department of Corrections-Department of Correctional Education
6	White	Female	28	Teacher at Virginia Department of Corrections-Department of Correctional Education
7	White	Male	36	Teacher at Virginia Department of Corrections-Department of Correctional Education
8	White	Male	49	Teacher at Virginia Department of Corrections-Department of Correctional Education
9	White	Male	52	Teacher at Virginia Department of Corrections-Department of Correctional Education

### **Data Analysis**

The data analysis is comprised of the participants' background data in table one. The demographics were assessed and coded by creating a summarized coding sheet. This coded sheet helped in evaluating the results. The categories of participants that identified included C = Caucasian and A = African American. During the documentation of the age of participants, 4 categories were developed. These included 22 to 32, 33 to 43, 44 to 54, and 54 and over. The gender of the participants was identified by two categories. These categories included female and male. The employees' years of employment in VDOC-DCE included 3 categories. These comprised of 5 years, 6 to 10 years, and over 10 years. During the documentation of the participant's education, a total of 4 participants had a 4-year degree. Moreover, 5 participants had advanced qualifications than just a 4-year degree. The highest-level education was a master of education degree since it was discovered that the highest qualified participant had obtained it. Lastly, the education level category included college degree achieved.

The other questions pertained to the educational experiences of the participants' students, the teaching experiences, and the impact of correctional education on the students. The key words or phrases that are common in the study were identified in the aforementioned categories. The assignment of codes to participants was, according to the order of submission of the surveys. All the codes of participants begin with Participant (P). The code P1 was assigned to the first participant, P2 to the second, P3 to the third, P4 to the fourth participant, up to the P9, which represented the ninth and last participant.

The coding system employed in the research study is represented in the table 2.

The table outlines the participants' demographics. The demographics on the table includes explanation of thee codes as well as the participants age, gender, period of employment and educational level of attainment.

Table 2

*Participants' Demographics*

Explanation of codes	Code	Code categories
Identification code for participant	P	P1 to P9
Ethnicity of participant	E	C–Caucasian/ A – African American
Age of participant	Ag	22 to 32 33 to 43 44 to 54 54and over
Gender	G	Male Female
Period of employment VDOC-DCE	EP	Under 5 years 6 to 10 years Over 10 years
Education Level	EL	College Degree

## Results

The central research question was: What are correctional education staff members' perceptions of GED programs? Based on the analyzed data, overall participants believed that self-efficacy as it is related to GED instruction was beneficial. Specifically, the consensus among participants was GED programs in the VDOC-DCE are successful. In addition, participants reported that offenders have shown a commitment

towards earning their GEDs and demonstrated less difficulty overall earning their GEDs based on the structure of GED programs. Participants shared similar perceptions that offenders as students' understanding of the concepts of the GED program grew through active participation in the program without being coerced. The participants were of the opinion that each offender learns something about the program and hardly there is an offender that creates a problem in learning of adapting what has been inculcating in the minds of the offenders. Moreover, when a participant is reluctant to adapt the new learning he would be penalized on the basis of its non-ability and reluctance.

Finally, correctional education staff members determined the overall success of the GED program (8/9 or 89% of the participants evaluated the GED programs as being successful, whereas one participant out of 9 has the opinion that the offenders usually do what they were doing before joining the correctional centers and there is not so immediate change the program inculcate in them) had social benefits for the public upon re-entry of offenders who earned their GED back into their communities. In other words, almost all of the participants reported their belief that the successfulness of the GED program for offenders adds to the factors that foster a low recidivism rate in the state of Virginia. According to VDOC-DCE) (2017c). *Statistical analysis and forecast unit* focusing on recidivism, Virginia had the lowest recidivism rate at 22.4% among the forty-five states that report three-year incarceration rates for felons for the years 2010-2013 (VDOC-DCE, 2017c). The in-depth analysis of the findings resulted in the compilation of a number of themes that were consistent with my research question.

**Theme 1**

The participants used educational software to teach African American students. Educational software programs are used for the following reasons. Teacher 1 used Leveled Literacy Intervention (LLI) for literacy instruction to meet students' educational needs. Teachers 2 and 3 used one-on-one as a teaching strategy, this technique enables the teacher to identify the strengths and weaknesses in the students while it would also help in mitigating the weaknesses in the students in the different dimension within the purview of the program. Teacher 4 uses imaging techniques that enable the students to learn by reading and writing. As the study shows that the learning through images will be lost lasting and never forget in the life. This is followed by the teacher 5, who used language syntax to encourage learning. With teacher 5, it is important to note that the learning is regarding the lessons which pertains to read and write, every student, assign a task that he has to complete in the stipulated time and interval. The task can be a homework or a class work. Teacher 6 used different learning styles to instill the lesson to the students, it is due to the fact that every student has its unique requirement to learn. Thus, the objective of using different learning styles enable the teacher to use the right style for the right type of student. Teacher 7 used the text Mr. Lincoln's Way from Patricia Polacco (Lipsey & Cullen, 2014). Teacher 8 used students' interests, if it would be followed, then the training sessions turn out to be boring and uninterested for the students or offenders. Lastly, teacher 9 differentiated instruction. Moreover, in order to make this learning program successful, all of the participants are allowed for communication with parents to support students. In their meeting with parents, they used to furnish the report



card of the student in front of them and discuss the success and loopholes for further success in the learning program of the student. Furthermore, this type of two-way communication allows not only to the teacher to share their experiences with the parents, but also allows to adopt the right terms and techniques as per the past experiences shares by their parents. Lipsey and Cullen (2014) assessed the effects of the correctional interpolations based on the recidivism and state that it is an important implication for the safety of the common public, especially when the offenders are released from the prison or probation. Previously, multiple efforts have been carried out to analyze the effects, where some of them used punitive approaches and others investigated the rehabilitation. The authors effectively conducted the meta-analysis or a systematic review to display the consistency in the existing literature and their respective outcomes. The results of the study suggest that the sanctions and supervision at its best are the modest means to reduce the recidivism, whereas in some of the situation, it acts as the source to have an opposite impact and thus the rate of re-offense increases remarkably. The comparison of the literature showed noticeable positive consistency covering relatively huge ratio. However, the variability of the impact is greatly associated with the ways of executing the treatment as well as the nature of the offender. The study also convincingly reveals the gap between the practice and the research literature. The evidence from the participants was consistent with the scholarly evidence which depicted a total of 9 participants having the work experience and previous educational background according to the findings of the study.

**Theme 2: Offenders' Perceptions of Correctional Education**

Individuals already sentenced to imprisonment are the penal establishments belonging to the State Department of Corrections Administration, which are assigned the purpose of rehabilitating criminals. After rehabilitating, it is also the mission of corrections to help ex-offenders re-enter their communities' productive citizens. The evidence collected from the participants suggested that 51 participants had positive reviews about the facility and the provision of correctional education.

A serious problem that arises in the penal administration of São Paulo is the transformation of the police districts and "chains", with an eminently provisional character, into establishments for the fulfillment of the sentence of imprisonment, without, however, possessing physical, human and organizational structure, rehabilitation of convicted persons. The second theme was that the participants use educational software to teach Hispanics American students. Educational software programs are used for the following reasons. Teacher 1 used Leveled Literacy Intervention for literacy instruction for all students. Teachers 2 and 3 used specific teaching strategies for Hispanic students. Teachers 4 and 5 focused on language syntax. Teachers 6, 7, and 8 focused on communication with parents. Teacher 9 differentiated instruction.

Moreover, the attitude of the offenders' highlight that they are very satisfied with the learning conditions in the correctional facility. They were provided all the necessary requirement that a good correctional facility center is required. Consequently, the majority of the offenders participating in the training were not seemed to be aloof from

the training sessions and their result after the sessions show that they were taking a keen interest in the processes of the training.

### **Theme 3: Correctional Education and Reintegration into Society**

Before entering into the analysis of rehabilitation programs in general, and education in particular, it is necessary, even succinctly, to present the prison administration in São Paulo, considering the split between establishments that are destined to the rehabilitation of individuals and those whose purpose is merely containment. The evidence from the study suggested that 89 % of the participants received correctional education, re-integration into the society and become the successful part of their respected society. Identified with this last one, are the police districts and the “chains”, institutions submitted to the Secretary of State for Public Security. They are intended for provisional imprisonment: individuals arrested in flagrante delicto, pronouncement or condemnatory sentence awaiting their sentence and incarceration by preventive measure and must remain separated from the others.

The second of these three areas were the most relevant topic area to the research topic of offenders’ academic success factors in GED education. The participants use educational software (Themes 1 and 2) to teach both African American and Hispanics American students. The Leveled Literacy Intervention program is used to meet students’ educational needs such as language syntax. The participants encourage learning by using students’ learning styles and by differentiating instruction. In this way they try to facilitate each and every student to become the respectable member of the society.

The participants use specific teaching strategies (Themes 3 and 4) to teach both African American and Hispanics American students, this technique made the learning program for the students unique and same for everyone. In addition to this, the participants incorporated the data of every students' background knowledge and interests into the lessons to create a positive learning environment. It made the training sessions more productive and result oriented as compared to the program that does have incorporated the knowledge, interest and other choices of the students. The participants use manipulative for hands on examples. The participants use educational resources (Themes 5 and 6) to teach both African American and Hispanics American students teach African American students. The participants use educational resources such as Scholastic resources for diverse students authored by Hispanic American authors.

Additionally, the participants have emphasized on the use of different strategies of learning in which they use specific instructional approaches to teach diverse students' reading, writing, and phonics for students to be engaged in quality writing or speaking by differentiating instruction to recognize the different cultures by displaying images of diverse cultures and software programs for literacy instruction (Theme 7). More importantly, the participants value diversity and use hands on activities to reinforce cooperative learning, hands on projects, graphic organizers, thinking maps, T-charts, Venn diagram to help students organize their thoughts by knowing diverse traditions and poems, songs, and regalia. In this way, they enable the students to transform their thoughts into different kind of representations. This will not only enable them to

transform their ideas into reality, but also shape their perception into something material to show the audience.

The first theme intended to discover the teachers' perspective on whether the program is successful or unsuccessful. There was a higher degree of agreement to the program's success whereby 8 out of the nine participants agreed that the correctional programs were successful. The participants stated that the success of the program was focused solely on the ability of the students to obtain credentials and the ability to employ critical thinking in their daily activities. However, only 1 participant was of the viewpoint that the program was not effective in attaining its agenda. The reasons given for the unsuccessfulness of the program were based on the administrative and admission concerns. Moreover, if the students are not able to respond to the intended training sessions and the other proceedings the sessions will be of no use.

All the participants demonstrated that the success of the program referred to the ability of the students to enhance their knowledge and obtain the designed academic standards within the minimum time frame. One of the participants stated, "It is upon the mental and physical ability of the students to encounter the knowledge that is imparted through this training within the premises of correctional facility centers." In order to assess the training results, this is measured through the test assessments and awards of different qualification levels, it has been a norm in the correctional facility centers that after imparting all the lesson and objective of the training program, participants have to undergo the test sessions. This session not only tests the extent of ability that has been inculcated during the sessions and assesses the future requirements regarding the next

sessions. In addition, the result concluded that all participants had numerous aspects in common, such as self-directed learning, tutoring and classroom aids which all contributed to the student's academic success. All the participants agreed that the mode of tutoring employed in GED contributes to the students' academic success. They were agreeing on the major things that are essential for the strategies included in the program comprised of one-on-one tutoring, self-directed learning, classroom aids, and instruction. According to 7 participants, aspects like group instructions, social studies, science, individuals working in the GED book, longer approval to test times, and insufficient technological support and training were mentioned among the ones that do not contribute to the students' academic success. Moreover, as far as the satisfaction of the participants related to these activities is a concern, they were quite satisfied with the ongoing process of the training. One of the participants elaborated, "The training sessions are best of their type, these are established after a long struggle and comprised of a detail comprehensive plan."

When asked whether the aspects of the GED program needed to be changed to attain the required improvement, 8 participants recommended for the addition of more resources and a change in how some subjects are tutored with a change in the testing criteria. It is because of the fact that the participants have the opinion that as many recourses are adding into the training facility, it will be an addition to what is available in the current setting. However, one participant said that the aspects were fine the way they were and that the program would succeed without any change. According to all the participants, once a student fails to depict the results within the set time and after attempting, the GED program would be considered as not being successful. However, if

the students stating passes all the four parts of the test within the set or designed period, GED program are considered to be succeeding for all the students.

### **Evidence of Trustworthiness**

#### **Peer Debriefing and Member Checking**

As stated in Section three, peer debriefing was to be employed to establish credibility. A peer de-briefer was employed by holding a single meeting in order to access the potential of the candidate in analyzing the coded themes. His major role was to provide feedback, detect problems, challenge assumptions, examine transcripts, and coding. For this case, a non-teaching staff in the prison working in education for more than 4 years was used. The de-briefer conducted his work in absence of the research objectives or any other data. All that he used was the survey transcripts. This was done to eliminate or prevent any bias that would arise. After debriefing, I analyzed the results with my own analysis and reported on the differences that existed between the de-briefer's coding and my own. The agreed themes were focused on the low rate of recidivism among offenders who have been in the education system since they were imprisoned.

In addition, journaling was used to increase a state of bias reduction and openness to everything that the participants said in their surveys. In order to achieve a more knowledge of my own point of view and achieve an introspection that is greater, journal articles were used to write down both affirmations and critiques of the GED program. An insightful review of the literature was conducted in order to identify the

efficacy of GED programs. Through this, the participant-focus was achieved during the course of the research.

The other method that was used to ensure credibility was member checking, as mentioned in Section three. The completion at each survey's conclusion was among the items in the process. During the process of journaling, I read all the information that I had heard from each participant and interviewed a few participants if any further elaboration was required. The information obtained from journaling was focused on by keeping track of the offenders' movements and behaviors they can better be prepared for transitioning their character from violence to peaceful one that follows the law and social norm. Electronic monitoring for a substantial duration could bring about the discipline and regularities in the behaviors of offenders without making them go through the imprisonment of correctional centers keeping them connected to the society they are eventually going to contribute to. This is how the implementation of such solutions can bring about the reduction in recidivism rates that we desire to achieve. Despite the divided opinions on the reduced recidivism due to electronic monitoring, most of the scholars have argued that electronic monitoring may prove to be a promising way of accomplishing the rehabilitation for young offenders as it offers the opportunity of normal social life to them while kept under observation. Additionally, I assured them that they would be given the opportunity to give their respective comments. The final factor that contributed to the dissertations credibility was the comments that the dissertation committee made.



**Transferability**

To ensure that all the survey's transcripts were authenticated, pen and papers were employed. The transcripts were meticulously transcribed. The data reported are an accurate and revealing study depiction.

**Dependability**

This component of evidence of trustworthiness was depicted in the entire research study process. The process of requesting survey completions of many participants combined with the information extracted from supporting documents ensured effective data triangulation. The feedback from the committee and Walden University's IRB process ensured the clarity of the research questions. Integrity during the process of coding was achieved through adherence to the outlined coding process and approval of IRB and the dissertation committee.

**Confirmability**

The participant's data were presented in a coherent and systemized manner. The data was free of bias. These bias-free data imply that all the conclusions made in the research were based on the data that the participants provided. During the stage of data collection and processing, accurate notes were made in order to minimize any chance of data redundancy.

**Summary**

Educational success is perceived through academic level assessments and tests given to the students. Educational skill or strategic skill, students typically are expected to go through a series of four phases of learning. At the beginning of journey students

feel hesitated in practicing the intended skill. With the help of feedback from mentors and excessive practice, students attain accuracy and fluency in order to become confident while practicing the skill. Additionally, during the assessment process, the level of critical thinking demonstrated by students reveals the educational success of the incarcerated GED students. In order to counter these issues, more training, and educational advances have been recommended for GED teachers to help the offenders become better professionals in their later lives. Access to assessment, treatment, and (when necessary) referral of offenders with mental disorders, including substance abuse, should be an integral part of general educational services available to all students. Effective delivery of education is dependent on the partnership between educational organizations and correctional services.

## Chapter 5: Discussion, Conclusions, and Recommendations

The purpose of this qualitative case study was to examine correctional staff members' perceptions of why some GED programs might be more effective than others. Using survey data obtained from correctional staff members, I investigated the effectiveness of the GED programs for helping incarcerated offenders enrolled in correctional school. The primary research question addressed how correctional staff members of incarcerated GED students perceive educational success.

### **Interpretation of the Findings**

The research question was aimed at discovering the ways in which the correctional staff members perceive the success of the GED program. According to the correctional staff, the students experience various academic levels before they attain the GED. During the GED program, the teachers take the students through various course units designed by the correctional department. Five participants had acquired a master's degree while the remaining participants had the necessary requirements of the GED programs. The promotion to the participant's perception was determined by the performance of the student in the final assessment of the current level. The study findings indicated that the GED programs in Virginia are successful.

In Virginia, the GED program produces 30,000 individuals who earn their GEDs each year. Graduates of the GED programs are sent back to their communities after completing the incarceration. The use of programs aimed at encouraging higher education for the imprisoned population is an influential step that could bring hope to this population. According to P8 and P7, several students earn their GED at the end of every

year. This indicates that the offenders are sent back to their communities possessing critical thinking skills that can enable them to thrive in their respective communities. Researchers claim that a reduction in the rate of recidivism is a sign of successful GED programs in Virginia and the United States (Petersilia, 2009; Stahl, 2011).

The themes indicated that communities realize that offenders are changed mentally and are considered more valuable. Changing society is becoming more acceptable towards the wrongs of others who seek redemption. This is an indicator of the successfulness of the GED programs.

Offenders have various reasons for taking GED tests (Petersilia, 2009; Stahl, 2011). According to P5, passing a GED test is a signal that the student is fully prepared and has acquired the necessary skills to be promoted to the next level. However, according to the available research, most offenders are motivated to take GED tests to attain self-improvement and shorten the prison sentence. According to P5, P1, and P3, GED tests are meant to discover the extent of learning within a given period of study. When offenders pass the GED tests, the correctional staff are assured of a change in the students' ability to handle life situations.

From the perspective of academic success, there is some indication that teachers are capable of imparting motivation to students (Hall & Killacky, 2008; Manger et al., 2010). However, teacher-imparted motivation does not play an equal role in the narratives of all the incarcerated learners during the course of pursuing GED programs (Manger et al., 2010). According to research, several of the learners with high levels of self-motivation derive it from personal promises to finish the GED, inspiration provided

by family members, and other factors. Teacher-imparted motivation is an important factor for other students, especially those who are as extrinsically motivated and who require teachers to provide hope, direction, energy, and other positive qualities to make it easier for the prisoner to do well in the classroom. According to P9, some offenders graduate from GED programs due to the motivation they get from their teachers.

The current education sector is trying to adapt to technological changes with the aim of equipping students with the technological skills required in job fields (Meyer, 2011). However, the correctional education programs in Virginia employ outdated versions of computer technology. These computers are used while teaching the incarcerated students computer skills and knowledge and how to apply this knowledge in the employment world. P4 stated that the GED programs do not have sufficient technological support and training. In the world of modernized technology and communication systems, outdated knowledge being given to incarcerated students may prevent them from securing jobs in their communities. The GED graduates' inability to find jobs may increase their risk of recidivism.

### **Limitations of the Study**

The study was limited to nine participants in the state of Virginia. Given the small sample, findings may not be generalized to GED programs in the state of Virginia and the United States. Another limitation of the study was that it was impossible to access data from the inmates or offenders. This meant that the findings depended on the staff members' perception of the effectiveness of the GED program. There could have been some degree of bias in the staff, which would have been clarified by collecting data from

offenders. Additionally, if any of the staff members had a bias in the administration of the correctional education program of Virginia, they may have been unwilling to declare the program unsuccessful. This would base on the reason that the administration does not act or match his/her expectations. During the course of the study, I lacked access to the IQ scores and the medical history of the offenders. This inability to collect relevant data reduced the effectiveness of the perceptions provided by GED staff. Other participants did not have clear insights on what a successful or unsuccessful GED program might look like. Moreover, because most of the participants felt that they were in a good program, it proved difficult to obtain insights into both successful and unsuccessful GED programs. Additionally, the final sample size was far below the expected number. Because the total number of e-mails sent was 55, I expected at least 25 responses and 20 completed surveys. However, 19 individuals responded and only 9 completed the surveys. This narrowed that data set on which the findings regarding the successfulness or unsuccessfulness of the GED program were assessed. Having more participants may have made it possible for me to gain a clearer insight into the successfulness or unsuccessfulness of the GED program.

### **Recommendations**

More correctional institutions should be investigated to broaden the insights regarding the successfulness of the GED program. Additionally, researchers should devise ways to interact with offenders who are beneficiaries of the GED program. Inclusion of offenders as participants would make it possible for the researchers to mitigate any bias that would arise from interviewing only the correctional staff members.

Additionally, research should examine other data sources including documents, medical records of inmates, and inmates' GED progress reports. Additionally, the records showing the number of incarcerated students who complete or attain a GED annually should be reviewed. This mode of research would provide a clearer view of the successfulness or unsuccessfulness of the GED programs in Virginia and the United States by offering quantitative insights about the existing educational programs in prisons.

Additionally, administrators and managers of the correctional education department should be interviewed or given surveys regarding the successfulness or unsuccessfulness of correctional education. The integration of data from inmates, documents, correctional staff members, medical records, and administrators could provide insights into successfulness or unsuccessfulness of the GED program for incarcerated students. Lastly, briefing correctional staff members regarding the findings of the current study may increase their willingness to participate in future related studies.

### **Implications**

Findings from the study are relevant for persons who have criminal records, the organizations or institutions with correctional education services or programs, and offenders who are returning to their communities. The stakeholders include prisoners, guards, incarcerated individuals, juvenile offenders, GED program officials, correctional education staff members, and program developers. Participation in correctional education programs has the capacity of increasing the odds of successful reintegration into society (Petersilia, 2009; Stahl, 2011). Successful GED programs enable inmates and ex-

offenders to support themselves. Inmates leaving prisons without earning their GEDs may struggle to support their families and meet other societal needs. However, with the skills imparted to them by attending the correctional programs, they are able to become self-sustaining. Through analysis of correctional staff members' perceptions of the correctional education programs, the current study provided concrete insights for institutions and other organizations that offer or plan to offer GED or other correctional education programs, (see Petersilia, 2009; Stahl, 2011).

### **Conclusion**

This qualitative case study addressed the correctional staff members' perceptions of the successfulness or unsuccessfulness of the correctional education or GED programs in Virginia. Basing on the findings of this study, the GED programs in Virginia are successful. The findings suggested that GED programs for correctional education offer the support necessary for offenders who are released from prisons to successfully rejoin their communities. Almost 89% of incarcerated individuals fulfill the criteria of GED programs. However, findings indicated improvements that the Department of Correctional Education in Virginia and the United States should make to eliminate weaknesses in the correctional education programs.



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#### Appendix A: Staff Participants' Recruitment via Public Domain E-mails

Hello my name is Andrew Beamon. I am enrolled at Walden University working on my dissertation. I need your help. I am interested in having you complete a survey regarding how you perceive the GED educational success of your students enrolled in your GED program. If you are going to participate in the study please respond to this email (andrew.beamon@waldenu.edu) with an outside employment email address to where I can forward the specific details of the survey to you. If you decide to help me by forwarding an outside employment email address to me, I will not consider this as consent to participate in the study. After I forward the consent and survey to your outside employment email address via a survey monkey survey, you can make the decision whether to or not participate at that time. Completing the survey via survey monkey will ensure that your participation will be anonymous.

Thank you,

Andrew Beamon

Walden University Doctoral Student

Appendix B: GED Survey Questions for Jail and Correctional School Staff

Open-ended Questions

(1) Do you think the GED program in your institution is successful? Why or why not? \_\_\_\_\_

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(2) What does academic success mean to you? How do you know when your students are succeeding and when your students are not succeeding?

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(3) Do you consider students to be successful GED students? Why or why not?

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(4) Which aspects of the GED program contribute the most to your students' academic success?

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(5) Which aspects of the GED program do not contribute to your students' academic success?

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(6) If you could make any changes to the GED program, which changes would you make? Why would you make these specific changes? If you could keep any aspects of the GED program the same, which aspects would you retain? Why would you retain these aspects?

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(7) Describe, in as much detail as you can, a specific moment at which you felt the GED program was succeeding for your students.

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(8) Describe, in as much detail as you can, a specific moment at which you felt the GED program was not succeeding for your students.

### Appendix C: Friendly Reminder Letter

Hello, this a friendly reminder that you have been invited to take part in a research study about the success of your offenders to effectively earn their GED conducted by Andrew Beamon, a doctoral student at Walden University in Minneapolis, Minnesota. The study will determine how staff of incarcerated GED students perceive educational success of students and if the instructional resources are appropriate. The researcher is inviting staff of GED students and/offenders who have successfully earned their GED to participate in the study. This study is voluntary and only takes about 30 minutes to complete. Being in this type of study involves minimal minor discomforts that can be encountered in daily life. Being in this study would not pose risk to your safety or wellbeing. I respect your decision not to participate in the study if you have chosen not to. However, there is still time for you to complete the survey and return it via survey monkey which ensures that your survey has been completed anonymously.