

## Teaching in an unfamiliar place: A mixed methods-grounded theory study on the experiences of new correctional educators

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**Abstract:** *New correctional educators must learn to teach in an unfamiliar correctional environment. In this convergent mixed-methods study, experienced correctional educators in Alberta, Canada reflected on their first 6 months teaching in adult correctional institutions. Teachers initially struggled to do something familiar (teach) in an unfamiliar place, perceiving prisons as non-conducive to education. Seeing the absence of a purpose-built community, they built one or attached to existing non-educational communities. New educators invoked strategies such as engaging in mutual support, connecting with non-education professionals, asking others to demystify institutional culture, and practicing reflexivity. When reflecting on useful training and orientation activities, participants favoured community and relationship building. The teachers' actions are framed using the concept of communities of practice, and a substantive theory of learning to teach in correctional environments is proposed. Finally, recommendations are provided to help ensure that new teachers are supported and prepared as they enter correctional education.*

**Keywords:** *informal teacher education, mixed methods, professional development, correctional education, prison education, community of practice*

Given that teaching in corrections is a unique educational environment, ensuring new instructors are appropriately set up for success is crucial. This article highlights the strategies new correctional educators used to mitigate their initial concerns as they learn to teach adult students in correctional environments. Teachers new to corrections favoured opportunities that enabled them to connect with and learn from others, developing communities and helping each other find their way together. Learning to teach in correctional environments does not have to be a solo endeavour. Ultimately, the article proposes a substantive theory of learning to teach in correctional environments.

The article first outlines literature pertaining to educational spaces and teachers' experiences in correctional education. The adult correctional system in Alberta, Canada is briefly described, followed by an explanation of the study: methods, analysis, and findings. The framework of communities of practice is used to explore the actions of teachers as they searched for support. The findings suggest that encouraging the development of such communities of prac-



tice, either in person or online, can support new teachers and alleviate some of their concerns. Finally, the substantive theory that emerged from these findings is provided, followed by a discussion of implications, limitations, and opportunities for future research are discussed.

### ***Educational Spaces in Correctional Institutions***

Educational spaces in correctional institutions are unique, both to the institution and when compared to other educational spaces (i.e., schools, colleges, universities). Within correctional institutions, classrooms are a place where students can regain their humanity (Wolf, 2020). Similarly, Dewey and Prohaska (2021) refer to educational spaces in prisons as the “closest approximation of the free world that most incarcerated people encounter on a regular basis” (p. 14). Educational spaces can also become emotion zones, areas of the institution that experience a temporary suspension of institutional norms and permits wider ranges of feelings (Crewe et al., 2014). In educational spaces the focus on humanity, growth, and learning contributes to their development as emotion zones. Wright & Gehring (2008b, 2008a) echo this in their exploration of correctional classrooms as spheres of civility. For them, schools (and classrooms) in correctional centres can come to resemble a community, preparing students for participation in civic society and democracy, communicating respect, empathy and reciprocity (p. 323). The concepts of emotion zones and spheres of civility help to demonstrate how education contrasts with typical correctional activities.

In this way, correctional classrooms are set apart from the rest of the institution, and correctional educators are often left to their own devices. For example, Irwin (2008) decorated her classroom space, acquired high interest reading material, and obtained assistance from painting and carpentry workers to infuse colour and obtain storage shelves. In doing this, she created a learning environment that was “as welcoming and comfortable as possible within the restrictive environment of the jail” (Irwin, 2008, p. 516). As teachers move between educational and institutional spaces daily, they are introduced to difficulties that do not exist in traditional education environments. The difficulties related to bridging these spaces will be taken up in the next section.

To successfully teach in correctional education, teachers must be adept at moving between the educational and correctional spaces, as well as navigating the power differentials in institutions (see Crewe & Ievins, 2020 for a discussion on penal power). The school or classroom, set up as a sphere of civility or emotion zone, is not quite a school, and yet not exactly a prison. Higgins (2021) identifies the contradiction: institutions of confinement are intrinsically damaging and controlling, while adult education is the “practice of freedom” (p. 151). Although all participants in this study acknowledged that they were beholden to the rules and surveillance demands of the institution, they struggled with the inherent contradictions of teaching in such oppressive environments. Taken together, these contradictions highlight the ever-present political aspects of correctional education (Patrie, 2017).

### ***Challenges of Teaching in Correctional Institutions***

In the edited volume, *In the borderlands: Learning to teach in prisons and alternative settings*, numerous chapters present the individual stories of experienced correctional educators; most of whom were trained to teach in traditional classrooms (Wright, 2008). The stories told by the participants in this project were similar; “most prison teachers did not intend to teach in prison” (Wright, 2005, p. 19). Some of the challenges teachers face relate directly to difficulties fitting education into the oppressive correctional environment. Initially, incompatibility of the education and correctional environments leads teachers to experience a form of culture shock (Wright, 2005, 2008); “educators must learn to work within and between [various prison] cultures” (Patrie, 2017, p. 52).

Correctional educators encounter institutional barriers to education; that is, correctional education is often understood as an unnecessary part of institutional life. Classes are cancelled when the institution requires the space, time, or people (Irwin, 2008), and individual students can be removed from class for punishment or other purposes (McAleese & Kilty, 2020; Weaver

et al., 2020). Furthermore, as institutional staff enter or interrupt classroom spaces, the learning environment is overturned (McAleese & Kilty, 2020). During interviews with correctional educators, Flores and Barahona-Lopez (2020) found that guards were “a major obstacle in providing instruction” (p. 7). Even without direct involvement from correctional staff, the institution’s policies and procedures provide additional barriers to education (Weaver et al., 2020). Teachers struggle with inadequate educational spaces and outdated materials (Lukacova et al., 2018), or must seek approval to bring in their own class materials (Weaver et al., 2020). “The ability to make good things happen in harmful spaces is a struggle for individuals tasked with offering programs and supports in prison” (McAleese & Kilty, 2020, p. 280).

Further complicating the challenge of institutional barriers to education, teachers also have struggles in their classrooms. Groups of students in correctional institutions are often very diverse, with a variety of educational backgrounds and experiences (Flores & Barahona-Lopez, 2020; Jurich et al., 2001; Lukacova et al., 2018). In one study, teachers identified professional development needs pertaining to specific communication skills, as well as understanding psychology and criminology (Jurich et al., 2001), indicating that they desired to better understand correctional students. Students are simultaneously dealing with the challenge of learning, the pains of imprisonment (Haggerty & Bucerius, 2020) and the impact of imprisonment on their outside lives (Price, 2015; Wright & Gehring, 2008a). Flores and Barahona-Lopez (2020) described the emotional labour that correctional educators perform, such as helping students to manage the emotions and impacts of incarceration. Additionally, it becomes impossible to ignore the realities of social inequality and mass incarceration. In providing a safer educational environment for students, teachers also became a safe person to whom students could disclose trauma (Flores & Barahona-Lopez, 2020).

The juxtaposition of emotion zones and spheres of civility with institutional spaces, combined with the complex life experiences of students can cause correctional educators to encounter philosophical dilemmas (Patrie, 2017). Faced with the realities of social inequalities, and the damage done by prisons (Behan, 2008), instructors question whether they are complicit with institutional power, their ability to push back on the systems, and their purpose in the institution. In the study that follows, many instructors spoke about how they changed as a result of working as correctional educators.

### ***Supporting Correctional Educators***

As described above, correctional educators are far from experiencing optimal teaching conditions. In order to navigate these conditions, teachers need a flexible and strong support system (Kamrath & Gregg, 2018). A lack of such support, from administration and colleagues, was found to be a factor in correctional educators leaving within their first three years (Kamrath & Gregg, 2018). Other researchers have added to these findings, noting that lack of support and training is common throughout correctional education programs (Lukacova et al., 2018; Wright, 2008).

When correctional education is managed by an outside educational organisation, as was the case for the educators in this study, the specific needs of correctional programs are often ignored. One effect of this is that correctional educators might not have access to needed supports since there is not enough demand (DelliCarpini, 2008). In response, DelliCarpini (2008) advocates for purpose built, in-house training and professional development. The call for responsive training and professional development is echoed throughout the literature (Jurich et al., 2001; Kamrath & Gregg, 2018; Lukacova et al., 2018; Wright, 2005). Despite the apparent absence of formal training programs for correctional educators, some have written about informal training that includes mentoring, debriefing, and security orientation (Hurkmans & Gillijns, 2012; Patrie, 2017). However, there does not seem to be any evaluations of the impact of formal or informal training on the success or retention of correctional educators.

The studies discussed above have investigated the struggles or concerns that correctional educators have, but not how individual teachers address their concerns as they are encoun-

tered. Program administrators may look towards training and mentorship programs, as well as other formal initiatives, but are these programs welcomed by correctional educators? How do experienced correctional educators, reflecting on their time as new teachers in institutions, understand their process of becoming a correctional educator? This study begins to explore possible answers to these questions, from the experiences of teachers in Alberta, Canada. Specifically, the research was guided by two questions: (1) What are the main concerns correctional educators have while learning to teach in institutional environments? (2) How do they attempt to mitigate these concerns? Developing a theory of how teachers learn to teach in correctional environments, can provide insight into appropriate supports for incoming correctional educators, increasing retention and success.

### **Alberta Corrections**

There are eight adult provincial correctional centres in Alberta, a province in western Canada. Each centre houses between 90 and 1600 people (Alberta Correctional Services, 2018) who are either sentenced to less than 2 years or remanded in custody and awaiting bail or trial. Everyone is eligible to participate in education programs regardless of their sentenced/remand status. People on remand status represent a huge proportion of the provincial correctional population; in 2017-2018, 70% of Alberta's provincial correctional population was remand (Malakieh, 2019). This proportion of unsentenced people in Canadian institutions has been increasing throughout the 21st century (Weinrath, 2009). Also in 2017-2018, Alberta's average daily count of people in custody was 3704, of which 40.3% were Indigenous (Alberta Correctional Services, 2018). Commenting on the rate of incarceration in federal prisons, (Zinger, 2020) noted that "the Indigenization of Canada's prison population is nothing short of a national travesty" (para. 5).

Taken together, the overrepresentation of Indigenous and remanded people in correctional centres reaches into the classroom. Students with remand status are dealing with uncertainty, court dates, and trials, in addition to other institutional and personal issues they might be navigating. Furthermore, many of the Indigenous Peoples in correctional classrooms are survivors of damaging government practices, such as residential and day schools (Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, 2015) and child welfare (Fortier & Hon-Sing Wong, 2019). As the teachers in this study mentioned, trauma is ever-present.

In Alberta, post-secondary institutions are contracted to provide education in most of the adult centres, along with a variety of non-profit organisations. Together they offer courses including literacy to grade 12 and GED, employment training, and personal development (i.e., anger management). The sizes of education programs range from 1-2 instructors supported by off-site staff to up to 20 full-time instructors and staff on-site. On any given day, around 10% of people in these centres are accessing education (personal experience, 2007-2019).

### **Research Design**

The purpose of this project was to understand how teachers with traditional teaching experience learn to be correctional educators. Understanding their main concerns as they teach in the new environment, and how they mitigate the concerns, points to the development of a substantive theory (or framework) about how people learn to teach in correctional environments. The project used a mixed methods convergent design (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018), whereby follow up qualitative interviews provide further insights into the results of a questionnaire that gathered qualitative and quantitative data (quan + QUAL). Interview participants were a subset of the questionnaire respondents.

To be eligible, participants needed non-correctional teaching experience and at least six months teaching groups of students in an Alberta adult correctional institution in the last 6 years. Since most education programs in Alberta offer compressed courses, six months would provide a teacher with the ability to teach multiple full cycles of their courses. By limiting participants' experiences in this way, I was able to highlight a timely and current picture of teaching in corrections.

Data was collected through an online questionnaire and semi-structured interviews that occurred between June and December 2019. The questionnaire gathered both qualitative and quantitative data about participants' educational background, teaching experiences, and current orientation and training practices, as well as reflections on the efficacy of orientation and training. Interviews expanded on the questionnaire topics, allowing participants more freedom to share and reflect on their experiences. In the interviews, participants shared personal stories and experiences related to teaching or learning to teach in corrections. They discussed how they were oriented, trained, or mentored to be successful as educators, and reflected on how they would have been better supported. Since all participants had other teaching or facilitating experience outside corrections, they compared their correctional education experiences with those of other teaching experiences. The interview guide (See Appendix) was developed in conjunction with the questionnaire development, but the questionnaire was analysed prior to the interviews being conducted. Therefore, the interviews were able to explore concepts and ideas that arose out of the questionnaire.

In order to advertise the study, all coordinators of correctional education programs in Alberta were emailed an invitation and asked to forward it to their colleagues. Additionally, invitations were emailed to past and present correctional educators with whom I had worked, asking them to forward it to their colleagues. Through snowball sampling, nearly all current correctional educators in Alberta should have had the opportunity to participate. The questionnaire was active for one month, garnering 10 complete responses, and 1 incomplete response (the incomplete response was included where possible). To protect anonymity, the questionnaire did not collect any geographic information. Questionnaire respondents were asked if they were interested in participating in an interview; to maintain anonymity contact information was kept separately from questionnaire responses. Participants who were interested in an interview represented 3 of the 8 provincial adult prisons in Alberta.

While the study was open to all teachers with any organisation who taught in correctional institutions, all participants were affiliated with post-secondary institutions. At the time of the study, there were 20-30 correctional educators affiliated with post-secondary institutions in Alberta. The 11 questionnaire participants averaged 3 years of teaching prior to correctional education, with only 3 respondents having less than 1 year of non-correctional teaching experience. They had an average of 5.4 years of experience in corrections, and 64% (7) were still currently employed in corrections. Education levels varied, but nearly all had 1 or more undergraduate or graduate degrees.

Of the 10 complete questionnaires, 9 participants expressed interest in an interview. One of the participants was not available; a total of 8 interviews were completed. Interviews were semi-structured and lasted between 40 minutes and 1.5 hours. Interviews occurred face-to-face or over the phone. Interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim, and all questionnaire responses and interview transcripts were cleaned to ensure anonymity of participants as well as correctional centres, post-secondary institutions, community organisations, and geographical location.

### **Mixed Methods-Grounded Theory Analysis**

This study used classic grounded theory in the tradition of Glaser and Strauss (1967; see also Breckenridge, 2014; Bryant & Charmaz, 2011). Combining classic grounded theory with mixed methods research design is typified by Shim et al. (2021) as mixed methods-grounded theory: "a research methodology that relies on the use of qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods data, approaches, logics, and strategies for the purpose of developing a good explanatory theory" (p. 62). Grounded theory allowed me to explore the experiences of teachers within the social process of learning to teach in correctional centres (Starks & Brown Trinidad, 2007).

Grounded theory leads to the development of an explanatory or substantive theory of learning to teach in correctional environments (Bryant & Charmaz, 2011). Further research and development of the substantive theory could lead to the development of a formal theory

of learning to teach in unfamiliar environments, or more generally, learning to do something familiar in an unfamiliar place. Substantive theory and formal theory differ in their specificity or abstraction (Glaser & Strauss, 1967).

Two research questions were addressed (Breckenridge, 2014; Kenny & Fourie, 2015): (1) What are the main concerns correctional educators have while learning to teach in institutional environments? (2) How do they attempt to mitigate these concerns? To answer these questions, data from the questionnaire and follow up interviews were analysed. Questionnaire data focused on the types of training or orientation opportunities that were afforded to respondents, and their assessment of whether these activities helped them to feel prepared or supported. Interview data focused on the experiences of learning to teach in correctional environments but were not limited to training or orientation opportunities. Taken together, the mixing of quantitative and qualitative data formed a more complete picture of the experiences of new correctional educators and enabled me to connect the experiences of teachers who had access to more training opportunities with those who did not have such access. In this way, the findings form an archipelago; the experiences of different instructors seem on the surface to be separate but are in fact part of the same structure (Bazeley & Kemp, 2012).

Questionnaire data were compiled to understand the demographics of correctional educators, current or past practices of orientation and training, and initial reflections on supportive and unsupportive experiences. As a result of the small number of respondents, only general descriptive statistics were generated. Throughout analysis, these descriptive statistics were returned to in order to ensure that they were reflected in the grounded theory categories.

Qualitative data (from interview transcripts and qualitative portions of the questionnaire) were initially coded using verbs ending in “-ing,” in order to emphasise actions and processes (Sbaraini et al., 2011). Codes were not pre-determined, that is, they were developed only from the experiences of participants (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). During coding, I wrote memos to explore major themes within the interviews, the connections between interviews and emerging codes, and possible resolutions to the research questions. To enable integration of the qualitative and quantitative data, I wrote memos connecting the descriptive statistics to possible emerging codes. Throughout the study I also wrote reflective memos, which allowed me to document and bracket my experiences in corrections, my experiences of the interviews, and (in some cases) my memories of the moments being recounted in the interviews. This ensured that participants’ meanings and attributions remained central, and emphasises the constructivist elements in the study; participants’ experiences and sense-making took priority. It also enabled me to identify my position as a former mentor and/or supervisor in some of the situations that were being recounted.

Throughout, two main ideas continually resurfaced. The first idea was one of questioning; participants talked about asking questions, wondering, and making assumptions about what they would experience in the correctional classroom. The second idea was developing relationships; participants spoke about the importance of relationships with other teachers, correctional staff, supervisors, and students, as well as outside relationships with family and friends. In order to develop the substantive theory, I sorted initial codes into categories. Guided by the main ideas of questioning and building relationships, the following categories were used: concerns/struggles, expectations, managing the concern (made worse by), managing the concern (made better by), feelings and surprises, results/effects of teaching in corrections. These categories and subsequent memos lead to the development of the emerging substantive theory, outlined in a later section.

## Findings

Teachers new to correctional education anticipated that the correctional environment would complicate their ability to teach. They had questions and assumptions about what teaching in correctional environments might look like. To manage these concerns, teachers sought community. To mirror the research design, quantitative data from the questionnaire is reported

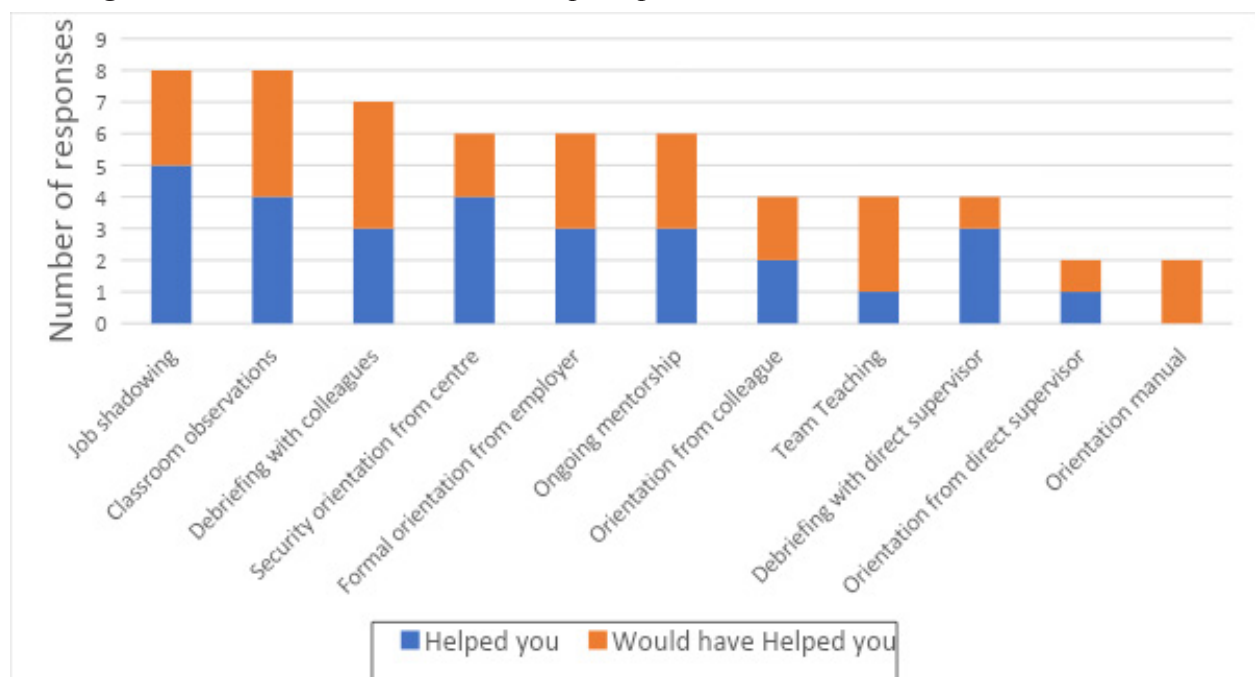
first, illustrating the training and orientation activities that teachers viewed as most helpful for preparing them to teach in correctional environments. Subsequently, the findings of the integrated grounded theory analysis are presented. The concerns that teachers had about teaching in the unfamiliar place of corrections are outlined, followed by a discussion of the various ways in which teachers sought and built community to support themselves and others.

**Current Training and Orientation Practices in Alberta**

The following findings come from the results of the questionnaire, where participants were asked to provide information about their training and orientation experiences and reflect on their support and preparedness for teaching in correctional environments. In the questionnaire, participants responded to the yes/no questions “Did you feel adequately supported when you started teaching in corrections” and “Did you feel adequately prepared for your first class in corrections?” Overall, 55% of questionnaire participants felt supported when they started teaching (n=6, n(total)=11), and 50% of participants felt prepared for their first class in corrections (n=5, n(total)=10). Only 40% of the questionnaire respondents felt both supported and prepared (m=4, n(total)=10).

In reflecting on the training/orientation activities that helped them (or would have helped them) to feel prepared, participants pointed toward community-building activities; that is, activities that included colleagues and had them immersed in the teaching and correctional environments. In questionnaire responses, participants valued training activities such as debriefing, classroom observations, and ongoing mentorship. Figure 1 visualises the number of questionnaire responses that selected each activity as either something that helped (or would have helped) the participant feel prepared.

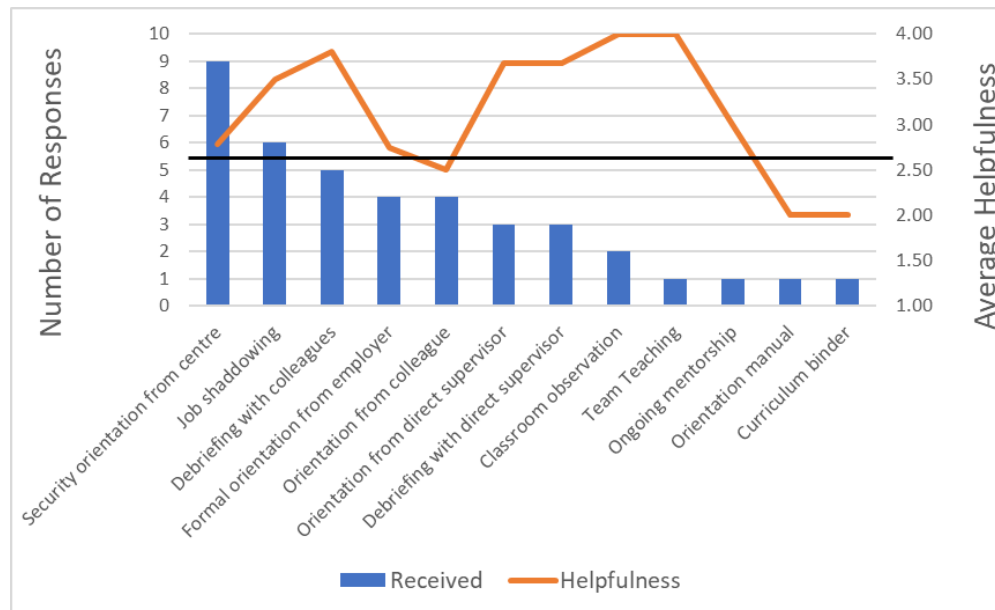
**Figure 1.**  
*Training and Orientation Activities that Help Prepare New Correctional Educators*



Note. n(total)=10

Participants were also asked to identify the training activities they received, which were evaluated on a 4-point Likert scale of Very Unhelpful (1) to Very Helpful (4). Figure 2 displays the prevalence and perceived helpfulness of teach training activity. Unsurprisingly, nearly all instructors received security orientation, which received a helpfulness score of 2.78 (more helpful than unhelpful). In this figure, an average helpfulness score of 2.5 represents a neutral perception; higher scores are generally seen as more helpful, and lower scores are seen as unhelpful.

**Figure 2.**  
*Perceived Helpfulness of Training and Orientation Activities*



Note. Participants rated only those activities in which they participated

Participants pointed to activities that build community as being most helpful. Debriefing, classroom observations, team teaching, and orientation from a supervisor were activities that scored high on the helpfulness rating (above 2.5). Although many of the activities were not available to participants when they started teaching in corrections, those that had access to additional training apart from security orientation generally found the activities helpful. Two activities were ranked as unhelpful overall: an orientation manual and curriculum binder, both of which are individual and passive forms of training that do not build community or relationship.

**Teaching in an Unfamiliar Place**

Although participants had very little previous experience in corrections, all participants had some previous experience in education. Questionnaire results indicated that everyone had either an education degree (n=9; 82%) or previous experience teaching (n=2; 18%). Of those respondents with an education degree, only two came to correctional education without previous employment as teachers. The two without previous employment experienced teaching during university field placements. Teaching, as a profession, was familiar to them. The correctional environment was unfamiliar.

The blending of educational and correctional spaces was the most common source of concerns or questions that teachers encountered. Said another way, the main concern of participants was how to teach in an environment that they expected to be not conducive to teaching. Contrasting teaching in a public school with teaching in corrections, one participant noted, “[Teaching] is common sense. You are hired as a teacher...when you go to public school they [do not teach you] how to be a teacher. But because it was in corrections it felt a little bit intimidating.” Another participant highlighted how pre-service teacher training was only partially adequate for correctional education:

*In general, I had a degree that was focused on [K-12] education. So I didn't have a degree in correctional education...I was actually prepared educationally on best practices and philosophies of education that I could apply practically, so that was helpful. For myself, ... I know what [the school system] is about, but it contrasts with correctional education – it's quite different if you haven't experienced it.*

Nearly all participants had some initial trepidation, linked to not knowing what to expect. However, once they got into a classroom with students, interview participants expressed surprise that things were not as bad as they had expected. One participant explained that they were uninterested in the teaching position while on a tour of the institution but changed their mind after seeing students in the classroom. Participants thought students would be “grumpier,” and noted that there are “a lot of misconceptions about who we work with,” but they discovered that students in correctional institutions are “just human.” Other participants identified that school was “a refuge” for people, and they were “pleasantly surprised...it’s nice being the positive people in their lives.”

In contrast to traditional education, correctional education has a reputation for being under-resourced. Participants discussed their struggle with lack of materials and resources, and how to adapt their courses for literacy and learning disabilities, as well as how to use a physical space that was not exclusively reserved for education. Since many of the participants were teaching non-academic courses for the first time, they also struggled with how to properly assess students in an ungraded course. For some participants who had experience in high-technology classrooms, the low-technology correctional classroom required additional adaptation. Teachers often struggled with the lack of appropriate resources for students, especially at lower-levels:

*To have these [literacy] students sitting there, without anything legitimate to teach them. And these students required a lot of help, monopolising the time... It created an extremely difficult situation because I had no answers and I had nothing for them. I was discouraged and students were discouraged.*

Compounding the unfamiliar students and education constraints, participants also faced an unfamiliar environment in corrections. They wondered how to act in most situations. They needed to learn cultural norms of the institution, the students, and the correctional classroom. One participant discussed how the basic tenants of correctional institutions did not align with their personal philosophy: “You’re stuck between a correctional institution that might not agree with your philosophy of teaching or your personal philosophy. So you have to understand how the two need to coexist.” As they learned to teach in correctional environments, the participants asked questions. These questions are indicative of reflective practice; teachers tried to fit their experiences of corrections into their previous teaching experiences, renegotiating initial misconceptions. The quotes from participants below demonstrate the constant reflective practice that teachers engaged in:

*And then there is that internal dilemma. Why is [a certain topic] ok when I’m teaching on the outside and not when I’m on the inside? ... That was something that was always on the back of my mind. Did I say too much? ... You go over reliving every conversation, did I give too much away? Do they know where I live?*

*It’s almost like an external conflict because you are working in an environment where the public view is against you because inmates are supposed to be punished and in prison...Then the institution is quite largely authoritarian where there is punishment and the officers are kind of in the same mindset. But then myself as a teacher, I was about caring for people and trying to liberate them through education, and so our agendas didn’t quite mix.*

Teachers also needed to learn how to deal with tough situations on a regular basis. These situations were often related to the realities of the correctional environment and students’ lives outside corrections. Comparing the prevalence of trauma in corrections to public schools, one participant said, “the emotional labour is harder in corrections. You hear about all sorts of terrible things that have happened to [the students].” Every interview participant mentioned

struggling to deal with some kind of tough situation; 7 out of 8 interview participants explicitly mentioned dealing with students’ trauma as a challenge. Below are some excerpts that show the extent of the past and present trauma experienced by students, and how that impacted the interview participants.

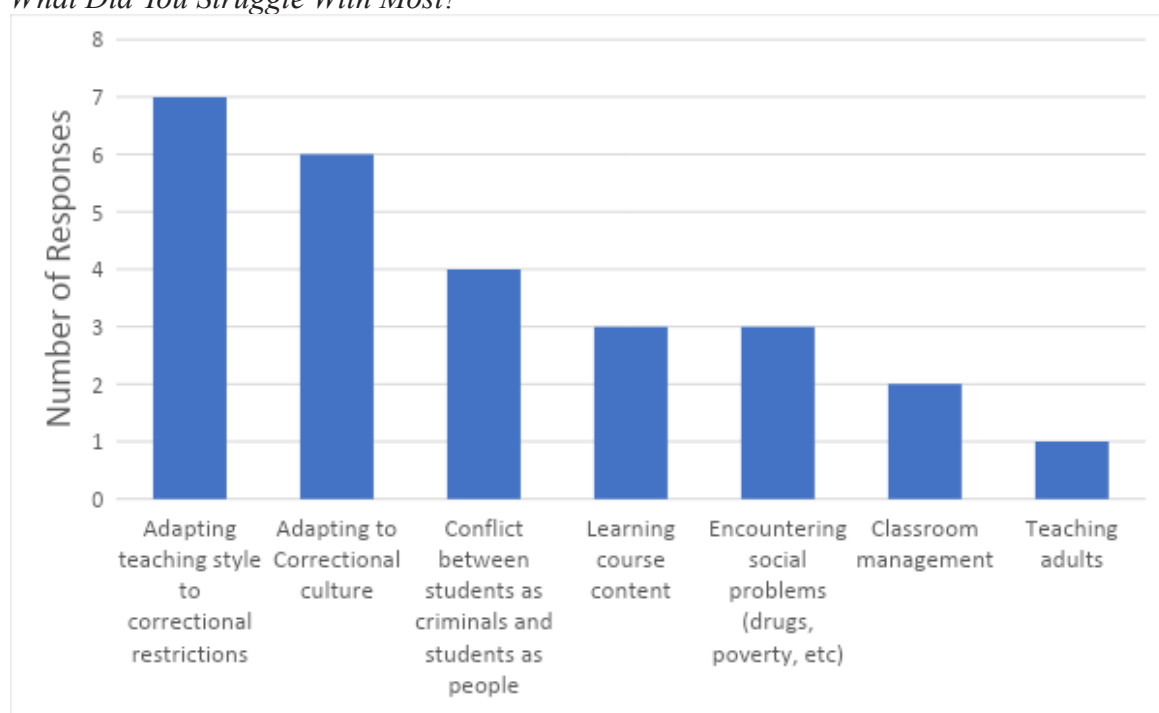
*There were certain stories that were told to me. I mean, I still remember them today, so I think that has an impact on your mental health. I think that can happen in any classroom it’s just going to happen more frequently [in corrections].*

*There [are] traumatic things that happen. I saw a guard come in and flat out yell at one of my guys ...my student wasn’t doing anything to provoke him at the moment. And I don’t know what happened back on the unit... You are going to see stuff like that and that’s tough. So you have to be able to ask for help and find someone you can talk to about it right? You need a good community of friends around you, because yah. That’s tough.*

*It’s unique because it’s within an institution. An oppressive one at that. So you have to, in your class, know the power dynamics between them and the officers. That means an officer peaking in and doing security checks; there is just hate [that] fills the room. You wouldn’t have that in a school...that to me is very unique...They are under extreme stress because they are in limbo...So everything is life or death to them. Missing a phone call from a lawyer, missing a visit, missing canteen, a medical... so important to them. Which is very hard to manage when you are trying to teach. Because you want to be sympathetic...but then trying to make it feel like school somehow.*

The concern about how to teach in an unfamiliar environment was echoed in the questionnaire. Participants indicated that they struggled the most with their new teaching environment: adapting their teaching style and adapting to the correctional culture. Figure 3 below summarises the most common struggles of questionnaire respondents.

**Figure 3.**  
*What Did You Struggle With Most?*



*Note. Participants were permitted to select up to 4 responses.*

### **Searching for Community**

In order to make sense of their unfamiliar surroundings, participants searched for community. Many participants spoke about the need to have a supportive community. They did this through building relationships with staff and students alike, asking questions and sharing information. One participant was very clear about the need to create community: “The community has to be built from the people; it can’t be built from the structure. There [are] no comfy seats, there [are] no colours... You have to create that.”

Within the institution, participants reached out to other teachers for mentorship and guidance, and spoke about the importance of debriefing with others. Despite the issues that some participants faced with correctional officers, others were able to develop positive relationships based on mutual respect and information sharing. Until they developed relationships and a reputation of their own, participants relied on the reputation of the program in which they worked. The relationships helped them to identify where the school fit in the institution, how to understand their place in the institutional hierarchy, and provided outlets for debriefing experiences. The following three quotations, from a questionnaire response and two separate participant interviews, demonstrate the importance of developing these supportive relationships with fellow teachers and correctional staff:

*Situation: Debrief with colleagues about correctional officer [inappropriate] language. Action: Felt like I could tell my colleagues what I was hearing and they would acknowledge my feelings. Response: They would listen and validate me. Result: I would turn to them any time I was upset by something I heard/saw on the unit.*

*What was really helpful was debriefing with other more experienced colleagues. So, that was usually ... informally just chatting about how things were going. Or if I had a question about something a student asked me...I would always tell the student, ‘I will check,’ and come back to them. I’d always ask the more experienced people what they would do.*

*I made a point of trying to learn [the officers’] last names...After class, I would go down and say ‘just so you know, this is what I noticed in class’...It helps them to run their unit because if [the student] has an emotional outburst then they can say... ‘the teacher already alerted that [the student] is emotional today... We are going to break this situation down before it escalates.’ ... I would also tell them when my class was doing really well...Because sometimes the corrections officers have this perception that [students] are bad people...they need to see [students] in a different light. And so if they can see that [students] are trying hard and working hard...that can change their perceptions.*

Once in the classroom, teachers developed a learning community with their students. They encouraged students to help each other, adjusted their teaching strategies, and provided second chances. The joy of learning was apparent in each participant’s voice as they shared stories from the classroom. They truly cared for their students. “We would practice and practice and practice until [students] felt that confidence.” One participant relayed the excitement that resulted when a student understood what the teacher had attempted to teach in multiple ways. Everyone was getting discouraged until the concept was finally grasped:

*We were working through it together and all of a sudden it happened! And I got excited. And he got excited. And we were getting it. And he was excited because he could see that I was excited about still learning... it was fun seeing it click in some of these guys. You know they’ve struggled with it their entire life and have this stigma of ‘I’m not good enough, I can’t do this’. And all of a sudden, no,*

*they can, and this is where they are at.*

Outside the institutional setting, participants connected to others doing similar work: through professional development activities, academic scholarship on correctional education, and informal networks of correctional educators. Participants shared that family and friends often did not understand the nature of their work, and this could limit the amount of support they were able to receive. The quote below comes from a participant who discussed how helpful it was to go to a specialist conference for helping professionals involved in the criminal justice system:

*To go out into the world and meet other people who work in similar environments and chat and say, 'Ok, we aren't the only people on this planet that work with our group'. It was kind of nice. If I wanted to do [professional development] about violence, I could.*

Above all, learning to teach in correctional environments takes time. Participants slowly addressed their concerns, found support where they could, and “eventually found [their] way.” It took anywhere from “a few weeks” to 1 year for participants to feel prepared and comfortable in their environment. After nearly 6 years of correctional experience, one participant said that they still did not feel completely prepared for class. Another noted that “daily life is pretty predictable.” In some cases when the instructors had a change in teaching assignment (either location or subject matter), they needed to restart this process again; learning to adapt teaching strategies specific to subjects into a correctional environment and learning to negotiate new areas of the facility. In time, teaching in corrections “became what I expected...the [classroom] atmosphere became what I thought it would.”

Almost immediately upon starting their work in correctional institutions, participants began giving back to their communities. Participants spoke about starting their positions at the same time as others, pairing up with other new instructors to share resources and information, and to debrief experiences. Participants also started developing procedures and formalising practices to fill knowledge gaps, and created shareable curriculum resources. “We didn’t know questions to ask, but for much of the time there weren’t real set answers yet. We started to develop answers and to share our answers with each other.” They purposefully checked in on new instructors and connected each other, which led to a practice of informal debriefing, described as “the best part of the job.”

In this study, people sought out their communities and built relationships themselves. Occasionally participants in this study shared that they were welcomed and mentored significantly by more experienced teachers; however, most of the time they needed to reach out to form these connections. Another participant noted that they started teaching at the same time as a colleague. Sharing the experience of learning to teach in corrections made it less difficult.

In absence of experienced mentors, participants needed to rely on their community building skills. Most felt that asking for support and asking questions was expected of them, but also that they could not expect for these answers to be provided to them without asking. Clearly, relationships helped new teachers navigate their concerns as they learned to do something familiar (teach) in an unfamiliar place (corrections).

### ***Experiencing Personal Change***

In interviews, participants spoke about how teaching in correctional environments changed them. Some came to see correctional education as a vocation and absorbed the title of correctional educator as part of their identity. Some participants had shifted their perception of society: education, gender, poverty, and justice. Connected to changing perceptions of society, they also experienced personal change. As participants taught in correctional environments, they reflected on their biases and personal experiences in the world and perceived themselves as becoming less judgemental. “I’m so much more aware of my stance on criminal justice. I’m more aware of different cultures and different circumstances now.” Another participant reflect-

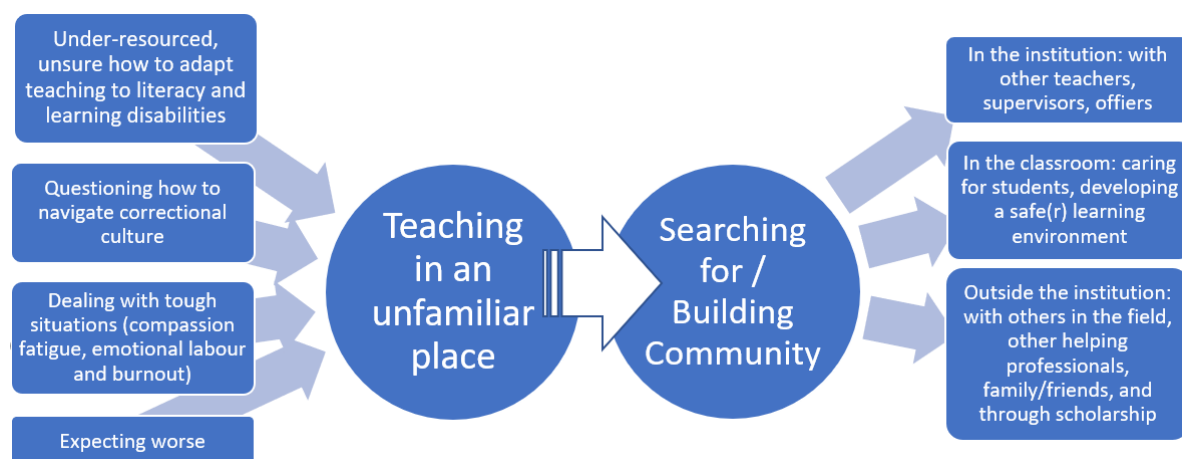
ed on their own personal development as a process:

*We all come with prejudices, with biases against incarcerated people, and this is an opportunity to look back at yourself...to actually question your own pre-conceived notions about a lot of things in life...Because I changed a lot as well, teaching and going through material with students. Because every group is different and you learn something new with every group...It helps to build yourself as a person, and also to widen your horizons.*

A visualisation of the main concerns and mitigation strategies of teachers discussed above is provided below in Figure 4. Despite the lack of formal training or orientation, most teachers eventually found their footing in the unfamiliar environment. While perhaps a formal orientation was not perceived as necessary, teachers needed to be told about possible opportunities for training and orientation, and empowered to ask for support. This was especially true in the case of less experienced teachers, who might not have known the breath of supportive opportunities that are typically available to new teachers. The participants worked to build community even in toxic work environments or when not supported by college or correctional administration.

**Figure 4.**

*Main Concerns and Mitigation Strategies of Correctional Educators*



## Discussion

### *Main Concerns Faced by Correctional Educators*

There have been numerous studies detailing the challenges faced by correctional educators (Flores & Barahona-Lopez, 2020; Lukacova et al., 2018; McAleese & Kilty, 2020; Patrie, 2017; Weaver et al., 2020; Wright, 2005; Wright & Gehring, 2008a). Questionnaire and interview results demonstrated that the main concern of teachers related to discovering how to teach in a non-educational environment. This concern encompassed many challenges that were highlighted in the literature, including the culture shock of the correctional culture (Wright, 2005), negotiating restrictions on pedagogical materials (Lukacova et al., 2018; Weaver et al., 2020), confronting complexities in students' lives (Wright & Gehring, 2008a), and resulting emotional labour (Flores & Barahona-Lopez, 2020).

Most participants had very little knowledge of the correctional environment before starting their positions, which led their expectations to be formed by media, stereotypes, and popular culture (see Cecil (2015) for a discussion of representations of institutional culture). Although they were surprised by the student body's receptiveness to education programs, renegotiating their initial misconceptions required teachers to engage in reflective practice. Conflicts between the educational spaces and the correctional institution led to participants encountering the power differentials inherent in corrections (Crewe & Ievins, 2020; Foucault,

1977; Wright, 2014). Many participants described personal philosophies of education that were aligned with humanist or critical education theories (Lee et al., 2020; Merriam & Baumgartner, 2020). Through reflective practice they engaged with philosophical issues such as the conflict between purposes of education and incarceration; pervasive surveillance and power dynamics; and impacts of systemic racism, colonialism, and toxic masculinity. This reflective practice often occurred during informal debriefs with colleagues.

### ***Mitigating Concerns through Building Communities of Practice***

Wright (2005) noted, “teachers bring to prison professional identities and practices fashioned in a different cultural landscape,” (p. 20) and as such, teachers need to adjust their practice of teaching to the new, unfamiliar landscape of correctional centres. Participants overwhelmingly referred to the importance of building community and developing relationships to help them navigate their new landscape. Over time, the communities they built helped them to merge their understanding and practice of teaching with their new correctional environment.

The teachers in this study sought community and built relationships themselves. Similarly, Weaver et al. (2020) noted that experienced teachers might not benefit from new support systems because they had already “learned the hard way” (p. 39). Occasionally participants in this study shared that they were welcomed and mentored significantly by more experienced teachers; however, most of the time they needed to reach out to form these connections. The connections were available if people asked, but were not immediately provided. For example, one participant said, “I probably didn’t ask [to observe a class]. If I asked, I’m sure [the opportunity] probably would have [been made available]”.

The framework of communities of practice (Hoadley, 2012; Lave & Wenger, 1991) is one way to understand this group-based, cross-professional learning. Communities of practice are groups of people who co-construct situated knowledge, in this case about teaching in correctional environments or working with people who are involved in the justice system. In communities of practice, as this study showed, learning occurs from authentic experiences. Learning to be a correctional educator is an embedded cultural practice, and is characterised by legitimate peripheral participation, where newcomers are both “absorbing and being absorbed in the culture of practice” (Lave & Wenger, 2001, p. 113; see also Lave & Wenger, 1991). Job shadowing, team teaching, and classroom observations are forms of legitimate peripheral practice, and were highly regarded in the questionnaire as helping teachers feel prepared. Interview participants also spoke about how having the opportunity to observe and practice teaching with an experienced educator was crucial.

For many participants, these communities of practice did not exist, or they existed in weak and hidden forms. In response, they attempted to build one, by connecting to others who do similar work or who work in similar places. This study made clear that it was primarily relationships that helped new teachers navigate the challenges they encountered learning to do something familiar (teach) in an unfamiliar place (corrections).

Both in interview reflections and questionnaire responses, participants seemed to favour training and professional development that helped to build community: job shadowing, debriefing, mentorship, and connecting with other helping professionals who work in corrections. These activities were also connected to notions of giving back; that is, teachers contributed their experiences, knowledge, and resources to support new teachers and colleagues. In a study about the clinical experiences of medical students in corrections, (Abbott et al., 2020) identified that newcomers often felt significant apprehension and stress before beginning their placements in correctional centres. One way to mitigate and diffuse the stress is to engage in debriefing and supportive relationships. On the other hand, self-guided activities such as an orientation or curriculum manual were seen by questionnaire respondents as less helpful overall.

Weaver et al. (2020) asked current correctional educators about preferences for additional support, including: a workshop, a faculty manual, a mentor, or faculty discussion groups. Interestingly, none of the options put forward garnered more than 60% support. Their results

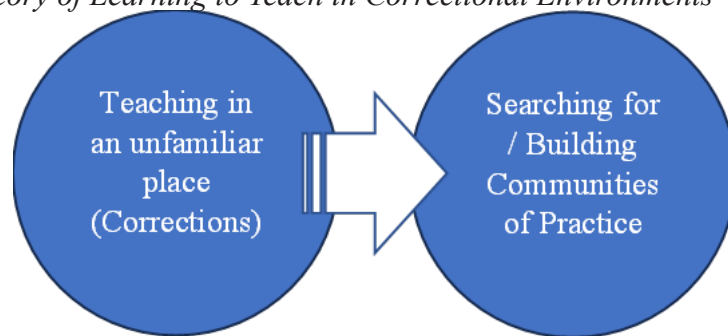
seem to conflict with the participants of this study who preferred communication and support. The discrepancy might be a consequence full-time or part-time work teaching in correctional centres; participants in Weaver et al. (2020) were comprised of teachers who also taught at other post-secondary institutions outside corrections, while participants in this study were full-time teachers in corrections. Hence, for those employed full-time teaching in correctional centres, the concerns might be more salient and the community approach to mitigating them more feasible.

### ***Developing a Substantive Theory***

As described earlier, grounded theory research aims to develop substantive, or explanatory, theories to help understand a particular social process. In the case of this research, findings point to a substantive theory of learning to teach in correctional environments. While the concerns participants had were echoed in other studies, framing them as teaching, in an unfamiliar place, enables a wholistic view of how the various concerns are mitigated, namely, through searching for or building a community. Therefore, a substantive theory of learning to teach in correctional environments (Figure 5) emerges from the findings illustrated earlier in Figure 4. That is, teachers respond to doing something familiar (teaching) in an unfamiliar place (corrections) by searching for or building communities of practice.

### **Figure 5.**

*A Substantive Theory of Learning to Teach in Correctional Environments*



### ***Implications for Practice***

This research and the emerging substantive theory suggest that if new teachers had access to a pre-existing supportive community, they would be better able to navigate their concerns about teaching in an unfamiliar place. The following recommendations could help teachers connect to a pre-existing community of practice or encourage the development of communities of practice for correctional educators.

1. Prior to beginning work as correctional educators, teachers had concerns about what education inside a facility looks like. Some of these concerns could be mitigated with a post-hire, pre-teaching discussion with another instructors. This could also be one way to begin a mentoring relationship.
2. Wherever possible, new teachers should be provided with opportunities for legitimate peripheral participation: i.e., observing other classrooms, job shadowing, or team teaching.
3. Not all correctional centres employ multiple teachers; therefore, effort should be made to develop a network of correctional educators to connect geographically isolated teachers with teachers from other centres. Communities of practice can exist online and stretch beyond one specific institution.

### **Limitations and Opportunities for Further Research**

Due to the timeline of receiving ethics approval, the survey occurred during the summer when some instructors and program coordinators were on summer break. This might have limited the number of survey participants and subsequent interview participants. It is therefore

difficult to create a complete view of who works in correctional education in Alberta (although not a main goal of the project). Since the total number of correctional educators in Alberta is unknown, it was not possible to calculate the proportion represented in the research.

Future research could expand upon the implications for practice, evaluating the utility of individual community-building activities and purpose-built communities of practice. Additionally, the proposed substantive theory could be further developed and explored. Given the small number of participants in a specific geographic area, it is not possible to fully confirm the substantive theory, as advocated for in complete mixed methods-grounded theory study designs (Shim et al., 2021). More research is required to verify theoretical saturation and the emerging theory as it is applied in different geographical contexts. However, the findings point to a substantive theory of learning to teach in correctional environments, and the results of this study integrate well with current international scholarship in the field.

### **Conclusion**

The findings of this study indicate that taking actions to help build or encourage communities of practice for correctional educators would be a valuable support mechanism. Teachers, officers, and administrators all have a role supporting correctional education, and therefore can all contribute in their own way to these communities. A community of correctional educators can help to ensure that centre-based teams (where they exist) are developed to support each other on site. For those working in isolated and smaller institutions, perhaps an online community of correctional educators would be helpful. This study demonstrated that more can be done to ensure that those who find themselves teaching in corrections do not have to build their own support.

The experiences of new correctional educators can be framed as teaching in an unfamiliar place. Since most teachers have little or no exposure to correctional environments before coming to correctional education, they are unsure of what they will find in their new teaching environment. To address their concerns, teachers searched for community. I use the framework of communities of practice to understand how teachers sought and built a community of support for themselves and other correctional educators. The emerging substantive theory explains that teachers respond to doing something familiar (teaching) in an unfamiliar place (corrections) by searching for or building communities of practice.

Teaching in correctional environments is often isolating, and occasionally teachers have few other correctional educators in their institution with whom to connect. Encouraging a community of practice can alleviate some of their concerns about the unfamiliar environments. By so doing, correctional educators can feel more comfortable in their environment more quickly, feel more prepared, and contribute to the development of their community, ultimately preventing complacency or attrition. Correctional educators should not need to find their own way.

### **Declaration of Interest Statement**

There are no conflicts of interest to disclose.

### **Ethics Approval**

This study received ethics approval from NorQuest College Research Ethics Board, approval number 19-011.

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### **Appendix: Interview Guide**

1. How does your experience of learning to teach in corrections compare to learning to teach in a different atmosphere?
2. What sorts of training/support did you receive in other teaching experiences? Was there training/supports that you wish you received, but didn't?
3. What were you expecting in correctional education? Did you find it easier or more difficult? In what way? What are the things that you first learned when you started teaching in corrections?
  - a. What struggles did you have?
  - b. What surprised you (positive or negative)?
4. What sort of training/support did you receive? Was there training/supports that you wish you received, but didn't?
5. Do you feel you were supported while you were learning to teach in correctional environments? In what ways were you supported or not supported? Ask for stories of support, and stories of lack of support.
6. Did you feel prepared for what you experienced in your first class? If no, how long did it take you to feel prepared? What contributed to you feeling prepared?
7. Based on your experiences, are there any common challenges that correctional educators face?
8. If you could give one piece of advice to new correctional educators, what would you say?