Becoming Human: How Learning to Read Helped Transform a Teenage Murderer

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ABSTRACT

This dissertation is submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Education at Flinders University, South Australia. It explores the significance of learning to read for a man convicted of murder as a young teenager. This unique case study uses retrospective narrative inquiry and follows the transformative journey of the former juvenile detainee, identified here as 'Ryan.' His literacy journey parallels his moral growth, and as he approaches 30 years of age (while still in prison), he reflects on how learning to read has profoundly changed him, stating, "Reading made me human again."

The structure of the dissertation is inspired by Lawrence Durrell's *The Alexandria Quartet*, (1957-1960) and tells Ryan's story from multiple perspectives. The clinical and courtroom accounts of him are interwoven with Ryan's personal narrative and with the researcher's reflections on teaching him to read. Unusually, the author takes on dual roles of both the researcher piecing together Ryan's narrative and, at times, the educator reflecting on teaching him to read at the age of 16. Ryan's story is conveyed in the first person, capturing his perspective as a student in detention and giving him his voice. His story is then revisited from the teacher's viewpoint, highlighting struggles common to many young detainees. Finally, the researcher synthesises and discusses his narrative through the lens of Recognition Theory.

Rehabilitation for juvenile delinquency has typically been viewed as outside the discipline of education but is considered here through overlapping perspectives. Ryan's perspective serves as the focal point with the educational lens intersecting with traditional juvenile justice and psychology viewpoints. This dissertation underscores the significant role educators can play in the lives of juvenile offenders and the rehabilitative importance of education within the juvenile justice system, emphasising the critical role of reading and the way in which this contributes to the development of empathy. Importantly, this research introduces new possibilities for the role of education and reading by highlighting the connections between reading, executive function, and empathy, and their collective role in rehabilitation.

Although approximately 40 teenagers across Australia are convicted of murder each year, there have been few if any opportunities to hear directly from long-term incarcerated juvenile offenders. Ryan's relationship and familiarity with the researcher, as his former teacher, allows him to give a remarkably candid and deeply personal account of his life both before and after the crime.

Ryan uses his voice to shed light on the systemic shortcomings and the consequences of early marginalisation while showcasing the transformative potential of learning to read as a significant contributor to rehabilitation.

DECLARATION

Declaration

I certify that this thesis:

1. does not incorporate without acknowledgment any material previously submitted for a degree or diploma in any university

2. and the research within will not be submitted for any other future degree or diploma without the permission of Flinders University; and

3. to the best of my knowledge and belief, does not contain any material previously published or written by another person except where due reference is made in the text.

Signed: Rae Therese Adams-Sinclair

Date: 14th July 2024

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I would like to extend my deepest gratitude to Ryan, whose courage and candour have been instrumental in the development of this thesis. His willingness to share his experiences, revisit painful memories and tell his very personal story has provided invaluable insights through which others may benefit. He has greatly enriched the research.

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LIST OF ABBRIEVIATIONS

ADHD: Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder

APY Lands: Anangu Pitjantjatjara Yankunytjatjara Lands

ARA: Adjusted Reading Age

ASD: Autism Spectrum Disorder

CAMHS: Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services

CD: Conduct Disorder

CELF-4: Clinical Evaluation of Language Fundamentals v4

CRT: Criterion referenced testing

DCS: Department of Correctional Services

DLD: Developmental Language Disorder

DSM-IV: Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders

FASD: Foetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder

NRT: Norm-referenced testing

ODD: Oppositional Defiance Disorder

REMC: Research and Evaluation Management Committee

WASI: Weschler Abbreviated Scale of Intelligence

KEY TERMS

Reading Age

The Reading Age of an individual indicates their reading ability compared to the average for their age. A person is considered to be reading well if they meet or exceed this average. An adult is deemed functionally illiterate if their reading age is below that of an average 11-year-old (Mulcahy et al., 2016). While complete illiteracy means being unable to read or write at all, functional illiteracy refers to insufficient reading and writing skills needed for everyday tasks, such as reading medicine labels, responding to workplace correspondence, reading bank statements, completing job applications, or assisting children with schoolwork.

Reading Instruction

The Australian Curriculum (2023) sets objectives for the literacy skills students should master. Reading instruction primarily relies on synthetic phonics programs, particularly focused on the first four years of formal education, Reception to Year 3.

Schools choose from a variety of products and resources that are compatible with the endorsed instructional approach. This study uses PM Benchmarks and the Burt Reading Test, which both utilise a levelling system from 1 to 30. Benchmarks are the expected level of achievement that students of average ability should reach throughout the first four years of schooling Typically, level 14 by the end of Year 1, level 21 by the end of Year 2, and level 25 or higher by the end of Year 3, with all students reading at level 30 by the end of Year 4 (Australian Curriculum, 2023). High-achieving students may reach level 30 by the end of their third year of schooling (Year 2).

PREFACE

Protecting the Identity of the Participant and Victim

Each year in Australia there are 35-40 juveniles incarcerated for murder. As a young teenager, Ryan was one of these. Given that he was a child at the time of the offence maintaining his anonymity has been paramount. Additional steps have been taken to ensure that as much as is possible, the information used within this thesis cannot be used to identify him. While his narrative correctly represents the interview data the following additional precautions have been used in order to comply with the ethical requirements for this research:

1. Details about his crime have been changed.
2. The victim's age has not been disclosed.
3. The Australian state in which the crime occurred has not been stated.
4. The year in which the crime occurred has not been stated.
5. Sources of information pertaining to personal details about Ryan have been redacted and will be cited as (reference redacted).
6. Educational data that may identify the location of the facility in which he was detained are also cited as (reference redacted).
7. Neither his age on admission, nor the length of his incarceration as a juvenile have been stated.
8. Other potentially identifying details have been made deliberately vague to deidentify him as much as possible.

CHAPTER 1

While learning to read is an educational responsibility, the consequences
of failing to learn to read are almost entirely social (Anon)

INTRODUCTION

The quotation above underscores the critical role of literacy in shaping social outcomes. In this dissertation, the challenge of learning to read for a teenage offender is explored, illustrating how educational interventions can profoundly impact self-perception and rehabilitation. Through a single case study, this research examines the transformative power that literacy had for this young man.

Through a quirk of timing, my teaching career has taken place outside the confines of mainstream classrooms. Working with the “unteachables” I spent 12 years ‘behind bars’ in a juvenile detention centre, several years ‘on the streets’ with rough sleepers and a further five years online with students whose behaviours were so severe that they were unable or not allowed to attend in person.

This has been a career pathway not for the fainthearted, challenging and rewarding in equal amounts. I have worked with the weird, the wild, the whacky and the wonderful…car thieves, burglars, rapists, murderers, victims of abuse, the damaged and traumatised, the angry and uncooperative, the rude, the abusive, the violent and the dangerous, yet they have been simultaneously some of the sweetest, funniest, and most resilient young humans one could imagine. I have attended far too many funerals, and mourned the loss of countless others from suicides, overdoses, high speed car chases, police shootouts and gang violence. So many young faces have been etched into my being which is now tinged with the sadness of their lost potential. There have been so many young ones who, in the end, we failed.

Every teacher has that one student who stays with them for ever, the one you wonder about years later, the one that made it all seem worthwhile. For me, it was ‘Ryan,’ who through the tragic culmination of unresolved trauma, learning difficulties, marginalisation, bullying, and a chaotic and dysfunctional home life, killed a person in a brutal, callous, and unprovoked attack. Ryan embodied the extreme end of educational and social challenges.

Nearly two decades later and still in prison, Ryan shares his story of struggle and transformation. This thesis, a dual narrative, weaves together his story of learning to read as a teenager with my story of becoming the accidental reading teacher to some of the most challenging students in the state. More importantly, through these narratives the transformative role that learning to read can play is illustrated.

As a graduate transitioning from a long career as a medical radiographer to becoming a science teacher, I was excited to be ‘gifted’ the smallest group in the school as my first class. I quickly discovered that these were the students in ‘juvie’ (i.e. juvenile detention) that no one else wanted, and as it turned out, also the ones that could not read. I found myself navigating the uncharted waters of teaching older students to read, a domain overwhelmingly tailored to young children, with a lack of resources and guidelines for teaching reading to disengaged adolescents making the challenge both daunting and exciting.

My path converged with Ryan’s within the walls of a juvenile detention centre. My mission was to teach him to read, while his was to avoid exposing his illiteracy. Our dynamic was intense but ultimately transformative, built on mutual recognition and understanding. His journey bears a striking resemblance to the story of Hanna Schmidt in Bernhard Schlink's novel, *The Reader* (Schlink 1975,1997), and the eponymous Oscar-winning film for which Kate Winslet won best actor for her role as Hanna (Daldry, 2008). Ryan, like Hanna, concealed the shameful secret of illiteracy, struggling with the stigma of not being able to read. Both characters committed serious crimes, and both stories highlight how learning to read – in both cases in prison - can be intertwined with personal transformation. For Hanna, learning to read while in prison brought about a profound self-realisation and understanding of her past actions. Similarly, learning to read fundamentally changed the way Ryan interacted with and saw the world.

Nearly two decades after his arrest, I met with Ryan again for this research and was surprised and moved by the ongoing strength of our teacher-student relationship. As an adult, Ryan reflects on the profound significance that learning to read has had for him. While I expected him to speak of the practical benefits, such as improved prospects, or having something productive to do, I was not prepared for the depth of his final answer. Ryan articulated that through reading he could finally feel empathy for others, including his victim. His six-word comment when asked what being able to read means to him was both a profound and a perfect summary of the transformative powers that learning to read can have. "Reading? … it made me human again.".

This thesis explores our individual and shared journeys and is framed through recognition theory, interpreting, and contextualising our experiences within a broader educational and social framework. In recounting these narratives, this thesis aims to shed light on the critical yet often overlooked area of teaching older students with complex needs to read. It underscores the importance of tailored educational approaches, and the deep, lasting impact that compassionate and appropriate teaching can have on the life of marginalised youth. This narrative research seeks to contribute to the understanding of effective reading instruction for disengaged adolescents while highlighting the transformative and rehabilitative power of becoming an independent reader.

The results indicate that the benefits of learning to read may go beyond academics and play a

more significant role in the rehabilitation of juvenile offenders than is currently acknowledged. Repositioning the value of learning to read within the rehabilitation process has implications for professionals working with offenders outside the education sector. For teachers, the results highlight that prioritising reading for young children at risk of school failure should remain a focus until they have become independent readers, regardless of chronological age.

1.1 Background Information

Data collated during the 12 years I was teaching within a Juvenile Detention Centre, from initial reading assessments of male juvenile offenders entering the facility, found that the average reading ability of those aged between 14 and 18 years was equivalent to that of a child aged nine years and nine months. This was well below the level considered "functional". Up to ninety-five per cent of the male offenders assessed were reading at levels several years or more below their same-age peers. Thirty per cent were functionally illiterate (reading age below 11.0 years), while nearly 20 per cent were reading at the level of an eight-year-old and still in the early stages of learning to read (reference redacted)

First Nations and refugee students had the lowest reading abilities and accounted for all the students requiring early phonics instruction (reference redacted). While these figures reflect a pattern found by North American researchers that indicated the average juvenile male detainee was five to six years behind their same-age peers in reading skills (O'Cummings et al., 2010; Steele et al., 2016), the local data I was collecting consistently showed that 95 per cent of male juvenile detainees had a reading ability between three and 13 years behind their peers.

Conversations I had as a teacher indicated that many students believed that their reading difficulties were a precursor to their offending and a catalyst for early disengagement from formal schooling. Their transformation from student to dropout was often rapid, albeit predictable, and was characterised by an increasing academic gap, diminishing self-confidence and their increasing use of negative behaviours.

The link between illiteracy and crime is well established, with studies from around the world showing that most prison inmates have poor literacy (Winn et al., 2011). Estimates suggest that 60-80 per cent of prisoners have reading and writing skills below basic levels, with those who remain unable to read on release having a higher probability of re-offending (Cree & Steward, 2022). Ultimately, illiteracy creates a subordinate position in a society where reading and writing are forms of power (Lal, 2015). Individuals lacking these skills are not only marginalised but also denied recognition and equal participation in social and political discourse.

Among incarcerated juveniles in the developed world, up to 85 per cent are functionally illiterate (Cree & Steward, 2022). Disengagement and poor educational attainment are well-established risk factors for juvenile crime, with growing evidence that educational progress can

reduce recidivism. Male juvenile offenders in detention facilities often report negative schooling experiences, including repeated school failure, high levels of frustration, and low self-confidence. Their poor academic performance is typically linked to difficulties with learning to read and a failure of the school system to address their needs (Hogenson, 1974; Seroczynski & Jobst, 2016).

Learning to read is a critical task for young children, and there is a strong connection between a child's self-esteem, self-view as learners, and reading ability. Failure in reading often results in feelings of shame and unworthiness (Stygles, 2022), leading to disengagement and compensatory behaviours (Granzin, 2022). Shame disrupts the development of a functional self-image (Brown et al., 2011; Gilbert, 2000) and occurs when perceived flaws are exposed to others (Frawley, 2020). Unlike guilt, which is behaviour-based, shame is self-based, making individuals feel worthless, and powerless (Tangney et al., 2011). This emotion is linked to empathy and can hinder empathetic connections (Joireman, 2004).

Individuals experiencing shame often externalise their feelings as blame and anger to regain a sense of control and superiority (Tangney, 1990). Research indicates that the externalisation of blame mediates the connection between shame and physical aggression (Stuewig et al., 2010). Additionally, shame is associated with psychopathy, aggression, and other antisocial personality traits (Morison & Gilbert, 2001), as well as dysfunctional behaviours like withdrawal, avoidance, grandiosity, contempt for others, dependency, and oppositional tendencies (Tangney et al., 2011).

1.2 Significance of Reading

Brunner (1993) identified reading failure as a cause (rather than a correlate) of delinquency, that leads to school disengagement and behavioural issues, especially among boys who seem to prefer to be seen as "bad" rather than "stupid" (Saldanha, 2010). Despite the link between low literacy and juvenile offending, research has emphasised the psychosocial issues over educational engagement (Stephenson & Allen, 2013). While early reading achievement is linked to reduced delinquency (Elies et al., 2021; Loeber, 1997; Williams & McGee, 2006), there is limited focus on whether improved reading support for high-risk students can help to reduce future offending. Researchers such as Snow (2005, 2012, 2019, 2021) and Swain (2018, 2020) advocate for better teacher training and support for students with developmental language disorders, prevalent among juvenile offenders and suggest that tailoring reading instruction for older youth in the justice system, based on the science of reading, can help bridge this gap.

1.3 Failure Cycle

Struggling to read has a significant impact on academic performance and can initiate a cycle of failure. Antoniazzi et al. (2010) emphasise that failure to recognise and address language difficulties in the first year of school can lead to reading acquisition problems and prolonged

academic struggles. Early difficulties with literacy skills often manifest as poor behaviour, as demonstrated by Atkinson et al. (2015) in their longitudinal study which correlated language difficulties with behavioural issues among adolescents. As behaviour worsens due to frustration and disengagement, academic performance suffers further, perpetuating a cycle of underachievement (Adams, 2015).

Often depicted as a school-to-prison pipeline, Maguin and Loeber (1996) established that low school achievement, independent of socioeconomic status, is a strong predictor of delinquency. They outlined the typical failure cycle as poor academic achievement fostering behavioural problems that lead to disciplinary actions such as time out or suspension, which remove the student from academic instruction and perpetuate failure by decreasing learning opportunities and observing appropriate behaviours (Costenbader & Markson, 1998; Polanin et al., 2021). Despite numerous investigations since, into this correlation across schools, courts, detention centers, and post-adjudication facilities, it remains one of the most contentious what-came-first conundrums (Grigorenko et al., 2019).

Reading proficiently by the end of Year Three is a crucial marker in educational development (Dunk, 2021), as students transition from learning to read to using reading skills for problem-solving and critical thinking (Hernandez, 2011; Nation, 2019). Hernadez (2011) found that 75 per cent of poor readers in Year Three remain poor readers in high school, with Year Four curriculum materials being incomprehensible to 50 per cent of students with reading difficulties.

Students who have not mastered basic reading skills (Reschly, 2010) encounter more behavioural and social problems in subsequent grades (Miles & Stripek, 2006) and face increased dropout risks. Sixty per cent of students who fail to graduate high school are classified as struggling readers (Hernandez, 2011). The link between language impairment and reading skill acquisition underscores the impact of literacy challenges on academic outcomes, with targeted interventions to support struggling readers essential to disrupting this detrimental cycle (Adams & Willis, 2015)

The Royal College of Speech and Language Therapists (RCSLT, 2022) discusses the connections between behaviour and underlying needs, emphasising how unmet communication needs can manifest as behavioural issues, highlighting the importance of addressing communication difficulties to improve behaviour, reduce misunderstandings, and support positive social interactions.

1.4 Research Problem

The connection between academic failure and delinquency, violence, and crime is strongly linked to reading failure (Styslinger, 2017). While psychologists, sociologists, and criminologists acknowledge this connection (Brozo, 2002; Scully, 2015; Vacca, 2021), there is a lack of focus on

effective reading instruction for juvenile offenders (Crozier, 2021; Vacca, 2008). Additionally, primary sources on how juvenile offenders learn to read are scarce. Moreover, primary source material reflecting the experiences of how juvenile offenders learn to read is scarce.

This thesis addresses these gaps from an educational perspective, intertwining the stories of a student learning to read and a teacher developing effective pedagogies. It centres on the reflections of an adult male prisoner, Ryan, who learned to read in detention after being convicted of murder as a teenager. His narrative, complemented by my account of his progress (as his teacher), illuminates the complexities and successes of literacy education in juvenile detention. Discussions on juvenile crime, usually led by non-educators, neglect the crucial role of reading, leaving a gap in addressing the link between illiteracy and criminal behaviour among adolescents.

Dominant narratives in psychology and criminology focus on the risk of reoffending, with rehabilitative efforts targeting criminal behaviour risk factors (Day et al., 2004). Ryan's educational journey shifts this focus to his struggles as a student, emphasising the need for educational support in the justice system and the transformative potential of learning to read in rehabilitation (Steele et al., 2016).

Educators play a pivotal role in the lives of children and can serve as crucial identifiers of at-risk youth long before they become involved in the juvenile justice system (Sanders et al., 2016). Although not the primary focus, this study also addresses the importance of early intervention efforts to support vulnerable children and to interrupt the "school to prison pipeline" (Swain et al., 2020). Additionally, providing further insight through the inclusion of my reflections as an educator, adds a unique dimension to the study, providing insights into the challenges of literacy education within the juvenile detention context. By maintaining Ryan's voice as central to the research, it amplifies a rarely heard perspective, while presenting his story from my viewpoint as his teacher enriches the understanding of effective literacy teaching practices.

1.5 Research Aims

The research explores the transformative potential of learning to read for juvenile offenders by investigating Ryan's personal experience of this during his juvenile incarceration. It considers the well-documented link between illiteracy and crime (Brozo, 2002; Scully, 2015; Vacca, 2021) and educational marginalisation through his narrative. It considers the peripheral placement of reading within the rehabilitation process and argues for it to become a more central component. Accordingly, this investigation has been guided by the following aims:

Aim 1a: To explore the participant's perception of the transformative power of learning to read.

Aim 1b. To explore how marginalisation through illiteracy is interconnected with school failure and delinquency

Aim 2: To consider how Ryan's narrative contributes to a nuanced understanding of juvenile offender rehabilitation, positioning reading intervention as a central component within the rehabilitation process.

1.6 Research Question

The above aims have been interrogated through the following research question:

Question: How has learning to read as a teenager influenced a juvenile offender's perception of himself?

1.7 Research Method

This thesis uses a narrative case study approach integrating the strengths of both narrative research and case studies. Narrative research is well suited for application to the human sciences (Riessman, 2008) as it focuses on personal stories to understand how individuals make sense of their experiences and emphasises the importance of both the experience and the story (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). While case study research involves an in-depth analysis of a specific instance within its real-life context (Stake, 1995; Yin, 2018). Integrating narrative research within a case study framework allows for a richer and more nuanced understanding (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Integrating narrative research within case information endeavours to construct an in-depth exploration of Ryan's personal journey of learning to read within the broader context of juvenile detention and educational intervention, providing a comprehensive and insightful analysis of the impact of literacy on his self-perception and behaviour.

The narrative structure of Ryan's story parallels the model used in Lawrence Durrell's *The Alexandria Quartet*, a series of four interrelated novels: *Justine*, *Balthazar*, *Mountolive*, and *Clea* (Durrell, 1957, 1960) The structure of the quartet is unique, with the first three books presenting different perspectives on the same set of events, while the fourth book continues the story forward in time (Andrewski & Mitchell, 1959). This multi-layered narrative approach allows readers to see the complexity of characters and events from various viewpoints.

Similarly, Ryan's story unfolds through multiple lenses to create a multilayered story: initially through documentation of his incarceration, followed by his personal narrative, and finally through the teacher's perspective on teaching him to read providing a deeper, more comprehensive understanding of the impact of learning to read on Ryan's self-perception and long-term development.

Like intersecting circles of a Venn diagram, Ryan's perspective serves as the focal point, around which the educational lens intersects with the more traditional perspectives of social work and psychology. This thesis challenges these conventional boundaries of inquiry, offering a means

through which these circles might increasingly overlap through exploring the impact that learning to read had for Ryan (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011).

While measures of progress for offenders are typically static snapshots and risk assessments, this educational perspective, anchored in Ryan's lived experience, moves beyond these limitations to give a retrospective account of his progress in terms of personal growth, resilience, and empowerment, outlining a transformative journey from incarceration to rehabilitation.

It relies primarily on a semi-structured retrospective interview as the primary data source to explore the personal impact of learning to read for Ryan. The use of semi-structured interviews aims to capture the diverse and nuanced experiences of the participant (Blandford, 2013). Themes were identified via thematic analysis for a structured approach to interpreting the participant's narrative (Braun & Clark, 2006).

Complementing the interview data, background information compiled through a variety of documents including psychology reports, speech pathology reports, court reports and reading progress data to offer additional insight into Ryan's narrative. By integrating these sources of information, the research endeavours to construct a more holistic understanding of Ryan's personal and literacy journey (Creswell, 2014).

As I was also the former teacher of the participant, the second narrative (that of me, the teacher) is autoethnographic in nature. This introspective lens adds depth and context to the study, offering firsthand insights into the dynamics of the teaching-learning process and the educator's role in facilitating literacy development while also exploring Ryan’s perception of their relationship and how it contributed to his personal growth (Sparkes, 2002). This multi-layered approach aims to capture a comprehensive picture of the phenomenon, through different perspectives and dimensions (Teddlie & Tashakkori, 2009).

Centring on Ryan's retrospective narrative, this thesis moves beyond the confines of traditional academic discourse, offering a humanistic exploration of the redemptive possibilities inherent in education (Freire, 1996). By using the power of narrative to inspire empathy, provoke introspection, and catalyse social change (Polkinghorne, 2007), it underscores the importance of listening to marginalised voices, amplifying their stories, and recognising the profound impact that learning to read can have.

1.8 Scope of Study

This narrative inquiry examines the experiences of a single juvenile detainee from three distinct perspectives: that of the subject himself, portrayed through interviews; the legal system, depicted through the analysis of documents; and the teacher, narrated in the third person through

the retelling of their joint story (teacher-student).

While limited to one student, Ryan is representative of many juvenile offenders, most of whom presented with similar issues as observed by the teacher over many years and through working with many hundreds of students. Ryan was the most extreme, having being deemed almost unteachable and unlikely to be rehabilitated, based on the severity of his crime and the young age at which he offended. He does, however, have a fascinating story to tell that clearly demonstrates that no-one is beyond redemption, and that there are strategies that can be used successfully and that may be applicable and useful with others.

Ryan's perspective reveals the transformative effect that learning to read had on his life, his empathy and executive functioning. The legal system's view provides context on rehabilitation strategies, while the teacher's perspective discusses pedagogical challenges and successes, emphasising the power of recognition, success and motivation.

This study explores the changes in moral and personal growth following literacy acquisition after a history of school marginalisation, explained through recognition theory and executive function development.

1.9 Contributions to Disciplines

This research has relevance to the disciplines of education, social work and psychology.

1.9.1 Gap in Research

This study addresses a crucial gap in research about:

a) the effect of literacy interventions for adolescent beginner readers within juvenile detention. It presents a unique blend of personal reflections centered on the first-person account of the participant, complemented by my narrative both as his teacher, reflecting the importance of the relational dynamics, acknowledgment, and validation necessary for marginalised students to experience success.
b) It advocates for a broader and more comprehensive understanding of the transformative power that comes from learning to read and highlights its potential as a rehabilitative strategy.
c) Furthermore, this study extends its relevance beyond the field of education, with implications for other disciplines involved in the care of at-risk youth.

1.9.2 Generation of Primary Source Material

The study contributes newly generated primary source material by documenting the experiences of an adolescent male who learned to read in a juvenile detention facility. It challenges the dominant perspective around the significance of education programs, particularly reading

instruction, in the rehabilitation of juvenile offenders. This counter-narrative highlights the marginalised voice of the juvenile offender and disrupts assumptions held by some disciplines outside education. By prioritising literacy interventions as a powerful rehabilitative strategy, it offers an alternative viewpoint that underscores the transformative potential of education in correctional settings. For professionals outside education, it also provides a rare opportunity to hear from a murderer, convicted as a teenager, reflecting on his emotional growth during his incarceration.

1.9.3 Giving Voice to Unheard Students

By examining the role of reading from the perspective of a male juvenile offender, the study gives voice to a demographic often overlooked in academic discourse. His voice adds depth to understanding the complex relationships between academic failure, reading challenges, and delinquency, aligning with recognition theory's notion of misrecognition and invisibility. It offers valuable insights into the complex interplay between literacy skills, educational success, and involvement in delinquent behaviour.

1.9.4 Juvenile Offenders and Education

Departing from traditional perspectives, the study offers a novel examination of juvenile offending through an education lens, emphasising the potential for literacy as a rehabilitative intervention. It challenges the status quo by advocating for reading instruction/ literacy to be a central component in rehabilitation strategies.

1.9.5 Teaching Juvenile Offenders

My reflections of teaching in this unique context adds a layer of understanding to the implementation of successful reading support programs suitable for the unique context of juvenile detention, revealing the complexities, emotional dimensions, and personal growth involved in the process and provides a nuanced understanding of the pedagogical challenges. It also contributes to the discourse on effective teaching strategies for older students within other educational settings, emphasising the importance of acknowledgment, validation, and responsiveness in relational interactions.

This research bridges gaps in existing literature, offers a comprehensive exploration of the transformative power of reading, inspires a shift in perception and contributes substantially to the discourse on education for juvenile offenders. Moreover, it underscores the challenges of teaching in correctional settings and emphasises the significance of empirically based pedagogical approaches, showcasing education's role in fostering rehabilitation and positive outcomes for at-risk youths.

1.10 Design of the Study

The thesis adopts a narrative inquiry design, intertwining the dual narratives of Ryan, the juvenile offender, and the teacher (also functioning as the researcher). This design underscores the significance of acknowledgment and validation within social interactions, aligning with recognition theory.

Semi-structured interviews serve as the primary data source, examining Ryan's journey of learning to read and giving voice to his experiences within the school context pre and post juvenile incarceration. Through these interviews, the study captures the nuances of Ryan's narrative within the relational dynamics of his educational journey. Thematic analysis was employed to discern recurring patterns and themes within the interview data, providing a structured lens through which to interpret Ryan's narrative (Braun & Clark, 2006).

In addition to interviews, the study incorporates the examination of documents and school records to enrich and corroborate the interview findings. This supplementary data source contextualises Ryan's educational background and progression (Taylor et al., 2015).

A distinctive aspect of this research is my dual role of researcher, offering both an overarching perspective, and a personalised account of Ryan's reading difficulties, narrated from the viewpoint of his former reading teacher. This approach adds an intentionally subjective dimension, offering insights into the teaching dynamics and presenting a parallel narrative of Ryan's story from an educator's standpoint (Verhoeven et al., 2019).

The method uses the interrogation of:

a) semi-structured interviews
b) thematic analysis
c) document review, and diverse perspectives

to comprehensively investigate the impact of learning to read for a juvenile offender. This multi-layered approach aims to provide a holistic understanding of the phenomenon, emphasising the significance of acknowledgment, validation, and relational interactions in fostering rehabilitation and positive outcomes for at-risk youths.

1.11 Summary

This chapter outlines the research aims, questions, methods, and scope, focusing on the role of education, particularly learning to read, in the rehabilitation of juvenile offenders. Using narrative inquiry, it examines the experiences of Ryan, a juvenile offender, and the teacher-researcher, to explore the relationship between reading, school failure, and delinquency. The study investigates

how learning to read has influenced Ryan's development and identity, and the role of recognition in his journey. Methods include semi-structured interviews, thematic analysis, and document review to provide a comprehensive understanding of literacy's impact on juvenile offenders.

The research addresses gaps in existing literature and offers insights into effective literacy interventions for adolescent beginner readers, advocating for reading instruction as a key component of rehabilitation strategies. By highlighting the experiences of a marginalised individual, the study emphasises the importance of acknowledgment and validation in achieving positive outcomes for at-risk youths. Through the integration of personal narratives, qualitative data, and theoretical frameworks, the research aims to demonstrate the significance of education in promoting rehabilitation and personal growth among juvenile offenders.

CHAPTER 2
LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Introduction

Numerous studies have established a correlation between low literacy levels and offending behaviour, particularly among juveniles. These studies predominantly emerge from sociology, psychology, and criminology, focusing on the risk factors associated with offending and recidivism, and strategies for mitigating these risks. However, other research also highlights the importance of engagement with literacy among juvenile offenders, revealing a gap in understanding how literacy practices can be effectively implemented, and used to support rehabilitation in juvenile justice settings.

This literature review aims to bridge these perspectives by examining the multiple connections between literacy and juvenile offending through the lenses of recognition theory and educational intervention. It explores how learning to read in detention can influence a juvenile offender's self-perception and address common risk and protective factors associated with juvenile offending and academic failure. Additionally, it examines educational gaps faced by juvenile offenders including the connections between reading, oral language, cognitive development (Case, 2021; Snow & Juel, 2005), and the perceptions of self-worth associated with reading. Furthermore, it highlights the redemptive potential of learning to read in fostering empathy and social understanding (Stephenson & Allen, 2013).

In existing approaches to understanding offending behaviour, a neo-positivist stance has prevailed across disciplines such as psychology, sociology, and criminology. This perspective emphasises identifying predictors of future offending rather than addressing root causes (Case, 2021) with research focussed on the interconnected and cumulative nature of these predictors, spanning social, psychological, pathological, biological, economic, and intellectual realms (Mrazek & Haggerty, 1994; Sharma & Singh, 2020).

Educators, however, recognise that the same complex challenges for students also significantly affect their academic success. Unlike the predictive approach, educators are able to provide interventions and support in the present, that help to mitigate the adverse effects of these challenges (Snow & Juel, 2005). Addressing crucial skills such as reading proficiency requires a deep understanding of the many influences on each student and requires one to employ diverse instructional strategies reflecting this complexity (Gillon et al., 2019, 2022). This review seeks to integrate these educational insights with findings from other disciplines to provide a comprehensive understanding of literacy's role in juvenile rehabilitation.

The issues presented in the review while extensive, are not exhaustive, with those included

being the most pertinent to Ryan's narrative both from the perspective of his offending, his self-perception, and from an educational perspective. The intersection of these issues illustrates the complex nexus of factors that background his story and will be referred to primarily in the discussion section of this paper.

2.2 Educational Disparities in Juvenile Offending

There are significant educational disparities among juvenile offenders, particularly in terms of literacy skills. However, improving these skills may mitigate the risk of recidivism and promote successful reintegration into society.

Australia has distinct justice systems for youth and adults, with the legal age of responsibility set at ten with those under 18 years considered juveniles, after which most individuals transition to adult criminal legislation (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2021). Youth justice agencies manage young offenders, primarily within the community, however, on average there are approximately 819 young people in detention each day, Australia wide, with 50 per cent identifying as Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islanders. Males constitute 91 per cent of detainees, with 83 percent aged ten to 17 years. A significant portion, 72 per cent, is on remand, awaiting sentencing (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2021). Indigenous youths are twenty times more likely to be detained than their non-Indigenous peers and were more likely to have attention or behavioural disorders (75 per cent) compared with non- Aboriginal detainees at 65 per cent. Additionally, 87 per cent of detainees were found to have at least one psychological disorder and 73 percent were found to have two or more psychological disorders (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2021).

While the completion of year twelve is the norm in Australia, 76 per cent of young offenders have already left school before their detention, with national figures indicating the highest year level completed is most likely to be year eight with an average leaving age of 14 years (Indig et al,.2016). It is widely accepted that juveniles at greatest risk of reoffending have concomitantly the lowest literacy levels.

In North America figures suggest that while nearly all students in detention have below year-level literacy skills, the majority can read. Significantly, this is not the case in (name redacted) where the majority of students in detention are not yet independent readers with a large proportion of these still learning to decode. Typically, only one third of the student cohort has independent reading skills (although most of these are well below their year level standard) with the other two thirds still require reading instruction. Figures collated by the researcher whilst at the (name redacted) juvenile detention centre over ten years 2008-2018, indicate that these juvenile offenders were up to seven times more likely than the general population (at three percent) and four times more likely that their north American counterparts to have intellectual disabilities (Frize et al., 2008;

Pedruzzi et al.,2021).

The impact of poor literacy has lasting negative effects with limited reading skills hindering post-incarceration non-offending lifestyles. It contributes to intellectual and social restrictions (Ridsdale, 2004) caused by unemployment, less earning capacity, fewer training opportunities, access to fewer health services, and increased likelihood of engaging in high-risk behaviours and reoffending (Brynner & Parsons, 2006).

2.3 Risk Factors Common to Educational Failure and Offending

Understanding the interplay between individual and social risk factors is crucial for contextualising the experiences of juvenile offenders, especially regarding their self-perception and educational outcomes. These factors, entrenched in sociology and criminology, provide a foundational framework for analysing juvenile delinquency (Case, 2021). Risks are classified into individual, social, and community categories, with cumulative adverse effects leading to escalated problem behaviours (Bry et al., 1982; Newcomb, 1995). This review focuses on risk factors that are common to both educational failure and offending.

2.4 Individual Risk Factors

Prenatal and psychological factors significantly influence delinquent behaviour and educational achievement, shaping individuals' trajectories from early development. They include factors such as maternal health during pregnancy and perinatal complications (Balbuena et al., 2024). Prenatal exposure to substances such as cigarettes and drugs has been shown to increase conduct and behavioural problems (Fergusson et al., 1993; Wakschlag et al., 1997) and linked to deficits in executive and intellectual functioning (Guille & Aujla, 2019). Likewise, prenatal alcohol consumption, is the leading cause of preventable birth disorders, and developmental delays with Foetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder (FASD) closely associated with criminal behaviour, with a study showing 36 per cent of juvenile detainees affected by FASD, 89 per cent of whom exhibit severe neurodevelopmental impairments (Bower et al., 2018).

The resulting individual childhood traits such as low academic performance, school disengagement, and limited aspirations, increase the risk of delinquent behaviour (Herrenkohl et al., 2001), with proactive aggression, hyperactivity, poor concentration, impulsivity, and risk-taking being predictors of future delinquency (DeFoe et al., 2013; Hawkins et al., 1998; Vitaro et al., 2003). A study on teenage boys with hyperactivity found that low academic achievement has a more direct influence on delinquency than hyperactivity or socio-economic status (DeFoe et al., 2013) and suggested that interventions for hyperactivity should focus on academic performance rather than behaviour. (Relates to item 4.4)

Low oral language competence, including delays in language development, affects the ability to effectively use and understand spoken language, affecting social and educational success (Moffitt et al., 1994; Seguin et al., 1995; Snow & Powell, 2012). Approximately 50 percent of male juvenile offenders have a clinically significant oral language disorder that negatively impacts their reading, academic achievement, and social interactions, leading to a significant negative effect on their self-perception (Chow & Wehby, 2018; Dickinson et al., 2010; Snow, 2019).

2.5 Social Risk Factors

Social risk factors, such as family structures, peer relationships, and community dynamics, significantly influence delinquent behaviour and school success (Pyle et al., 2020; Wasserman & Seracini, 2001). Single-parent households, family dysfunction, poor parental supervision, sibling delinquency, and violence as punishment (Damm & Dustmann, 2014; Derzon, 2010; Farrington et al., 2009; Gupta, 2020; Wasserman & Seracini, 2001) have been identified as strong predictors of later offending and poor progress at school. Negative peer influences, and the presence of peers during delinquent behaviour also play a central role in adolescent antisocial behaviour and disengagement with learning (Bernasco et al., 2013; Gupta, 2022; Lipsey & Derzon, 1998; McCord et al., 2001; McGloin & Thomas, 2016; Van der Laan et al., 2009; Warr, 1996; Weerman et al., 2015). Understanding the interplay between these factors is essential for developing interventions within educational and juvenile justice systems to give better support to students. (Relates to item 4.4)

2.6 Community Risk Factors

Similarly, neighbourhood crime rates and school policies also shape the level of risk for involvement in delinquent behaviour (Farrington, 2000; Gupta, 2022; McCord et al., 2001), with children raised in high-crime, socio-economically deprived areas being more likely to engage in criminal acts (McCord et al., 2001; Trinidad et al., 2020; Chyn & Katz, 2021). Several studies identified that the lack of school bonding (Hawkins et al., 1992; Higgins et al., 2020) was a significant risk factor, with poor attachment to school and teachers correlating with higher delinquency rates, reduced academic aspirations, and weaker social relationships (Ford & Schroeder, 2011; Higgins et al., 2020).

Likewise, it was found that schools responding to poor behaviour based on policies and disciplinary measures such as suspensions and expulsions can exacerbate the likelihood of academic failure and increase the risk of delinquency (McCord et al., 2001) by weakening this attachment to school, thereby diminishing its protective influence (McCord et al., 2001). Rigid disciplinary approaches can further detach students from school and increase interactions with law enforcement, particularly among minority students (Hughes et al., 2020).

Students who struggle with reading often face lowered expectations, reduced opportunities for academic engagement, and stigmatisation. This can lead to decreased self-esteem, increased behavioural issues, disengagement and marginalisation via the negative classroom experiences and the systemic and structural barriers within the education system. Social marginalisation in young people has been shown to increase their risk of developing mental health problems and exacerbating existing issues (Rikala, 2019). Wenham (2019) suggests that the inability to learn to read leads to differential treatment among students, which reinforce these cycles of marginalisation and emphasises the need for a supportive and inclusive approach to literacy education to break these cycles of marginalisation. (Relates to item 5.3)

2.7 The Readiness Gap

The *readiness gap* refers to the disparities in cognitive, social, emotional, and physical development that significantly affects students' potential for success in school and educational outcomes and is especially pronounced among children from low-income families. The ongoing and widening achievement gap also contributing to delinquent behaviours (Barlow & Nescott, 2022; Fiester, 2010).

Health related challenges can further exacerbate this gap with children from low-income households experiencing higher rates of chronic conditions like asthma, ADHD, and other physical and mental health issues. These disparities are amplified by poverty and the resulting limited access to quality medical care amplifying these disparities (Case et al., 2002; Owens & McLanahan, 2020; Case & Paxson, 2006).

Early linguistic development, crucial for academic success, is often impeded in low-income environments due to a lack of interactions that promote language acquisition, such as reading and storytelling (Brooks-Gunn & Markman, 2005). This deficit leads to significant vocabulary discrepancies between children from lower-income families and their wealthier counterparts (Hart & Risley, 2003; Walker & Carta, 2020). Vocabulary development at age three has been shown to be an accurate predictor of reading achievement in Year Three (National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, 2000). Typically, children from wealthier families have heard 45 million words by age three, compared to only ten million for children from lower-income families, creating a 35-million-word disadvantage (Hart & Risley, 2003; Walker & Carta, 2020).

Likewise, social and emotional development can also be delayed in low-income households with children more likely to struggle with regulating emotions, following instructions, and engaging in cooperative activities, which are essential for navigating the structured school environment (Cooper et al., 2009). Furthermore, limited access to early childhood education, inadequate home learning environments and exposure to disadvantaged neighbourhoods with higher crime rates further hinder educational readiness (Terzian & Moore, 2009).

2.8 Reading, Oral language and Cognitive Development

Internationally, young people in the juvenile justice system are at high risk of long-term disadvantages and social marginalisation. Research on the oral language proficiency of juvenile offenders has highlighted early marginalisation, poor interpersonal skills, literacy challenges, academic underachievement, behavioural issues, and involvement in the justice system (Davidson et al., 2019; Tomlinson, 2012). Oral language competence includes receptive (comprehension) and expressive (speaking) abilities, with vocabulary size and complexity being crucial (Paul, 2003) to literacy acquisition and academic success. Optimal social and emotional experiences enhance language development, with a correlation established between childhood abuse and neglect and compromised language skills (Snow, 2019).

As learning to read is a linguistic task (Catts et al., 2003; Duke & Cartwright, 2021), the link between oral language development and reading acquisition is considered crucial. Children with well-developed speaking and listening skills, phonemic awareness, and word segmentation abilities are more likely to become proficient readers (Paul, 2003; Paul & Norbury, 2020). The *Matthew Principle* highlights the widening gap in reading and learning between children with and without linguistic skills, stressing the importance of literacy skills for academic success (Stanovich, 2004; Anderson & Dron, 2011) across the curriculum as essential (Dockrell et al., 2011; Dubois et al., 2020).

Hart and Risley (1995) found significant disparities in linguistic exposure based on socio-economic status, with children of professional parents hearing on average 2,153 words per hour, those with working-class parents hearing 1,252 words, and children whose parents were welfare-dependent hearing just 616 words. This creates substantial deficits in oral language measures even in pre-school with the effect being the greatest on boys living in poverty (Locke et al., 2002).

In Australia, formal literacy instruction occurs in the first three years of school, after which the instructional focus shifts from 'learning to read' to 'reading to learn' (Snow & Powell, 2012; Tong et al., 2014). Children with inadequate reading skills struggle to keep pace, leading to academic failures and escalating behavioural challenges, particularly among boys, resulting in increased referrals to clinical services (Hay & Fielding-Barnsley, 2009). Cohen et al. (1993) noted that children with behavioural problems are often not identified as having language impairments but are considered to have behavioural issues with the classroom management responding to behaviour rather than language support. (Relates to item 4.6)

Anti-social behaviour often begins in primary school, correlating with suspensions and exclusions, which further alienates students from the pro-social values required of them and decreases their chances of success in what is essentially a middle-class-orientated environment (Pagani et al., 1999; Shaw et al., 2019). Longitudinal studies have identified reduced oral language

competence as a risk factor for adverse outcomes, with developmental language problems in boys being an accurate predictor of anti-social activities by age 19 (Young et al., 2002; Atkinson et al., 2015). Poor academic achievement, family dysfunction, and low socio-economic status are likewise reliable predictors of deviant peer affiliation and involvement in the juvenile justice system (Fergusson, 2000; Stephenson, 2007).

Both Australian and international researchers affirm that young people in the juvenile justice system often have undetected oral language deficits (Bryan et al., 2007; Sanger et al., 2001, 2019; Snow, 2021; Snow & Powell, 2012). Australian researchers Snow and Powell (2008) found that more than 50 per cent of young male offenders had significant deficits in figurative and abstract language, sentence repetition, and narrative skills, that was shown to be unrelated to low nonverbal IQ. The results of a 2015 pilot study at the (name redacted) Youth Training Centre in which the participant of this study was included, reflected these findings.

Antoniazzi et al. (2010) suggest that boys with behavioural issues may have unidentified oral language deficits which can be apparent through difficulties in literacy transition. They emphasise the need for enhanced awareness in pre-service teacher education regarding early linguistic competence and its pivotal role in literacy transition (Snow & Powell, 2012).

2.9 Protective Factors and Negative Self-Perception

Protective factors play a crucial role in mitigating the negative impacts of risk factors on individuals, particularly by enhancing self-esteem and self-efficacy, and providing increased opportunities (Aazami et al., 2023). These factors interact with risk factors to buffer individuals against adverse outcomes (Kirby & Fraser, 1997; Lackova et al., 2019). Along with individual and social protective factors such as disposition, positive temperament, cognitive abilities, coping skills, a supportive family environment, and social support (Garmezy, 1985; Popham et al., 2021), academic success serves as a significant protective factor, helping to mitigate the negative consequences of poor literacy and school disengagement (Aazami et al., 2023).

While poor literacy often leads to academic failure and disengagement, thus fostering negative self-perception and deviant behaviours (Maguin & Loeber, 1996; Mulvey et al., 1997; Siegel & Welsh, 2006), academic achievement can boost self-esteem and help to maintain social expectations. Students facing school failure may exhibit avoidance and defence mechanisms, including disturbances, violence, emotional outbursts, and withdrawal, which further alienate them from normative standards (Siegel & Welsh, 2006).

Intervention programs and skill development have positive impacts on academic performance, breaking the cycle of failure (Maguin & Loeber, 1996; Costenbader & Markson, 1998; Polanin et al., 2021) High dropout rates among justice-involved individuals highlighting the critical

role of education in mitigating delinquency (DeRidder, 1991; Skiba et al., 2012; Lusk, 2015; Farrington et al., 2021). By examining protective factors, within the context of literacy and academic achievement, these studies provide insights into how targeted interventions and support programs can strengthen resilience, reduce recidivism rates, and improve self-perception among juvenile offenders. (Relates to item 5.4)

2.10 Perceptions of Self-Worth, Self-Esteem, and Reading

Self-perception refers to the process by which individuals observe and interpret their own behaviours, thoughts, and feelings to define themselves (Robak, 2001). Understanding the role of self-perception in juvenile offenders is crucial for addressing delinquency prevention and rehabilitation (U.S. Department of Justice, 2021), as it significantly influences personal and social identities (US Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, 2014) and impacts behaviour and decision-making among adolescents in the justice system (US Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, n.d.).

Literacy forms the foundation for educational and future success and plays a key role in cognitive development (Cunha et al., 2006). It enhances essential processes such as memory, attention, reasoning, problem-solving, language, and comprehension, ultimately affecting economic and social success through access to tertiary and vocational training (Heckman & Masterov, 2007; Cunha et al., 2006). Negative self-perceptions reliably predict rule-violating behaviour among juvenile offenders, underscoring the need for positive identity development in this population (Barajas, 2019). The stigma associated with being an offender exacerbates poor self-perception, negatively influencing behaviour and outcomes (Moore et al., 2016). Increasing self-awareness and developing a positive self-perception, particularly through literacy interventions, can help juvenile offenders envision a more positive future (National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, 2020).

Reading also significantly contributes to cognitive and emotional development, especially for children from low-income backgrounds (Hiebert, 2017). Poor spoken language skills and poor pre-reading skills, rather than cognitive ability, are primary causes of poor literacy development (Chall et al., 1990), especially for disadvantaged children (Locke et al., 2002). High et al. (2014) highlighted the association between early engagement with books and brain development, noting that early exposure to literature through parental reading of stories and picture books positively impacts cognitive and social-emotional outcomes (Deater-Deckard et al., 2003).

Developing empathy is critical for social and emotional growth. Literacy has an integral role in children's cognitive and emotional development (Er et al., 2020) as well as enhancing the emotional dimension by fostering empathy through characters' emotions (Anderson, 2020). Interactive story reading improves language development in the early years and supports the

development of empathy by allowing readers to experience diverse perspectives (Mar et al., 2006; Bal & Veltkamp, 2013). This is particularly important in the case of ‘Ryan’ and will be explored in greater depth in Chapter 7.2.4.

2.10.1 Self-Esteem and Reading

Clarifying the relationship between reading and self-esteem is pivotal for developing effective reading interventions. Self-esteem encompasses feelings that shape behaviour, influence attitudes, and drive motivation (Dedmond, 2009). Children struggling with reading difficulties face an elevated risk of both externalising and internalising mental health problems, including anxiety, depression, and conduct disorders. The correlation between reading ability and internalising symptoms suggests that poor readers are more likely to experience mental health challenges (Boyes et al., 2020). Reading difficulties can lead to embarrassment, frustration, and shame, thereby contributing to negative self-image and diminished self-confidence.

While illiteracy among male juvenile offenders has been attributed to poor school attendance and specifically to truancy (Maughan et al., 1996; Law Society South Australia, 2007), the relationship between reading difficulties and truancy poses a classic "chicken and egg" scenario: Do students become truant because they struggle to read well enough to meet classroom demands, or do they struggle to read because they are truant?

Addressing this conundrum is crucial for understanding the dynamics between reading challenges and school attendance among young male offenders and for developing effective interventions that address both literacy struggles and truancy among young males within the juvenile justice system. Importantly, their narratives suggest the opposite to the literature i.e. that reading difficulties lead to truancy, and in turn, truancy reinforces challenges in reading proficiency. This discrepancy highlights a significant gap in the research, underscoring the need for further investigation to clarify this relationship (refer to Aim 1b).

2.11 The Redemptive Power of Learning to Read

The transformative effect of learning to read for some young offenders extend beyond skill acquisition and serve as a catalyst for enhancing self-worth and potential redemption. Research highlights the profound impact of literacy on emotional and psychological well-being, supporting engagement with a non-offending lifestyle, such as meaningful employment, supportive relationships, community belonging, pro-social attitudes, and a sense of agency (Ellis & Bowen, 2017). This aligns with understanding how learning to read contributes to broader outcomes beyond academic proficiency.

Learning to read can transform the self-narratives of young offenders, providing practical

tools for communication, interaction, and experiences. Reading stories with characters who achieve redemption fosters a sense of hope, agency, and possibility (Slotter & Ward, 2015). Identifying with characters who navigate challenges helps construct a redemptive narrative that modifies their stigmatised identity (McAdams et al., 2001).

Likewise, learning to read can cultivate increased self-worth and a personal redemption script among juvenile offenders with reading proficiency boosting self-esteem and confidence (Lipnevich & Beder, 2007; Yestrau, 2015) and serving as a tool for personal transformation by offering an avenue for self-reflection and growth, through which life narratives can be redefined (Pals, 2006; Lam, 2012). Engaging with literature allows individuals to explore diverse narratives and perspectives, fostering empathy and understanding. As individuals become literate, they gain the ability to articulate their thoughts and emotions, contributing to personal redemption by enabling the construction and communication of their own redemptive narratives (Pals, 2006; Lam, 2012; Roberts & Yoon, 2022).

2.12 Executive Functioning and Reading

Executive functions refer to a set of cognitive processes essential for controlling behaviour and cognitive tasks. These functions include attentional control, cognitive inhibition, working memory, and cognitive flexibility, primarily occurring in the prefrontal cortex of the frontal lobe (Diamond, 2013). Higher-order executive functions, such as planning, reasoning, and problem-solving, require the simultaneous use of these basic processes. These functions develop and change throughout life and can be enhanced or adversely affected by factors such as trauma (Chan et al., 2008).

Key executive functions include: working memory, which allows individuals to hold and manipulate information in their mind; cognitive flexibility, which enables them to shift between tasks and thoughts; and inhibitory control, which helps them ignore distractions and resist impulsive behaviours (Diamond, 2013). These skills are essential for a wide range of everyday tasks, including learning and decision-making, and are crucial for goal-directed behaviour, problem-solving, and adapting to new situations. Individuals with impaired executive functioning may have difficulties with organising tasks, time management, impulsivity, and maintaining focus thus having a negative impact on academic performance, workplace productivity, and personal relationships. This impairment is particularly evident in conditions such as ADHD, oppositional defiance disorder, conduct disorder, traumatic brain injury, and certain neurodegenerative diseases (Jurado & Rosselli, 2007).

Cognitive and stimulus control are opposing processes linked to either internal or external stimuli that compete for behavioural control. Inhibitory control is required to override behaviour driven by external stimuli, with the prefrontal cortex playing a significant role in executive

functioning. Impaired cognitive control is also associated with conditions such as addiction, ADHD, and autism (Malenka et al., 2009; Solomon et al., 2008).

Executive function also plays a pivotal role in learning to read, involving cognitive skills essential for managing and coordinating the complex processes involved in reading. Key executive functions such as working memory, cognitive flexibility, and inhibitory control are crucial for decoding text, understanding syntax, and comprehending meaning (Cartwright, 2012). Working memory allows students to hold and manipulate information about letters, sounds, and words, essential for phonological processing and reading fluency (Swanson & Jerman, 2007). Cognitive flexibility helps students shift between different components of reading, such as recognising words and understanding context, while inhibitory control enables them to focus on relevant information and ignore distractions (Follmer, 2018).

These executive functions are foundational for developing literacy skills, supporting the ability to integrate new information, self-monitor comprehension, and employ strategies for understanding text. Without strong executive function skills children may struggle with the multifaceted demands of reading, ultimately reducing their academic success and overall learning experience (Blair & Raver, 2015). Figure 1 below summarises the connections between executive functions empathy and reading.

Executive Function	Role in Behavior	Role in Empathy	Role in Reading	References
Working Memory	Maintains behavioral goals and plans	Holds and manipulates information about others' emotions	Keeps track of plotlines and characters	Swanson & Jerman, 2007
Cognitive Flexibility	Enables adaptation to changing situations and rules	Allows shifting perspectives to understand others' viewpoints	Interprets different contexts and meanings in texts	Mar, Oatley, & Peterson, 2009
Inhibitory Control	Manages impulses and focuses attention on goals	Suppresses immediate reactions to consider others' feelings	Focuses attention on reading tasks and ignores distractions	Blair & Raver, 2015; Decety & Lamm, 2006

Figure 1: Core executive functions that support essential skills in behaviour regulation empathy development and reading proficiency (By author from listed references)

2.13 Empathy and Executive Functioning in Reading

Empathy, crucial for social interactions, involves understanding and sharing others' emotions (Decety & Jackson, 2004), and encompasses cognitive processes like perspective-taking and theory of mind, which support recognising and responding to others' emotional states (Deutsch & Madle, 1975; Feshbach, 1975). Advances in neuroscience, particularly studies on the mirror

neuron system, have illuminated the neural mechanisms underlying empathy, demonstrating how the brain facilitates empathetic engagement (Iacoboni, 2009; Penagos-Corzo, 2022). Previously mentioned executive functions significantly contribute to empathy development by supporting perspective-taking and emotional understanding (Decety & Meyer, 2008). Cognitive flexibility and emotional regulation allow individuals with strong executive functioning to empathise effectively and respond to compassionately (Decety & Meyer, 2008). These functions, managed by the prefrontal cortex, include inhibitory control and working memory, essential for understanding and processing others' experiences (Zaki & Ochsner, 2012). Impairments in executive functioning can also hinder empathy, affecting social interactions and relationships (Morgan & Lilienfeld, 2000).

Children with oppositional defiant disorder (ODD), conduct disorder (CD), or autism often exhibit executive function deficits, affecting emotion regulation, impulse control, and flexible thinking. These deficits can impair their ability to process social information, leading to misunderstandings and conflicts (Cristofani et al., 2020). ODD and CD are characterised by patterns of disruptive behaviour, with CD involving more severe actions such as aggression and property destruction (Cristofani et al., 2020). Children with these conditions may struggle to understand others' perspectives, exhibiting lower levels of empathy and antisocial behaviours. Empathy's early development is crucial for social competence and future adjustment (McClellan & Katz, 1992; Lee, 2018). The development of language skills enhances their empathetic capacity, enabling them to better comprehend and articulate emotions (Hodges, 2001; Cress & Holm, 1998; Schaafsma, 2015).

Empathy comprises both cognitive empathy (perspective-taking) and affective empathy (emotional sharing), both vital for social interactions and relationships (Cristofani et al., 2020). Cognitive empathy supports the understanding of another's mental state and emotions intellectually and is essential for effective communication and conflict resolution. It requires less emotional involvement, allowing individuals to predict others' feelings and motivations (Cristofani et al., 2020). Affective empathy involves sharing and experiencing others' emotions, leading to compassionate and supportive responses. High affective empathy fosters strong emotional connections and support (Cristofani et al., 2020). (Relates to item 5.8)

Executive functions that support empathy are also essential for reading. They are associated with sustaining attention, inhibiting irrelevant information, and utilising working memory efficiently, all critical for reading comprehension (Best & Miller, 2010). Reading fiction, in particular, enhances empathy by allowing readers to step into the shoes of characters and experience diverse perspectives (Mar et al., 2006). Engaging with characters and their stories fosters perspective-taking and emotional regulation, deepening readers' understanding of others' emotions and viewpoints. Fiction reading enhances empathy through emotional transportation, where readers become emotionally engaged with characters and their experiences (Bal & Veltkamp, 2013). This

cognitive engagement, involving working memory and cognitive flexibility, helps readers to practice empathy by mentally simulating characters' experiences and emotions (Kidd & Castano, 2013). Inhibitory control allows readers to suspend their own viewpoints, enabling deeper immersion into characters' lives (Decety & Lamm, 2006).

Longitudinal studies indicate that advanced language ability predicts greater concern for others and less disregard for others, persisting over time (Ensor et al., 2011; Rhee et al., 2013). Language-based interventions enhance children's empathy scores and prosocial behaviours (Ornaghi et al., 2017), highlighting the role of language in fostering empathetic responses and behaviours. Engaging with narratives through reading nurtures empathy by exposing children to diverse stories and characters and providing insights into various emotional experiences (McCreary & Marchant, 2017). This exploration in literature offers low-risk opportunities to empathise with complex emotional scenarios, contributing to social skills and emotional intelligence development. A meta-analysis confirmed the strong relationship between empathy and executive functioning, with language development influencing empathetic responses and behaviours (Yan et al., 2020; Conte et al., 2018; Ensor et al., 2011; Girard et al., 2017; Ornaghi et al., 2017).

2.14 Critical Review and Gaps in Literature

2.14.1 Literacy Interventions and Juvenile Offenders

While there is substantial evidence highlighting the general benefits of literacy, specific studies focusing on literacy interventions for young offenders within the juvenile justice system are limited. The transformative potential of learning to read, particularly in enhancing self-worth and supporting a sense of personal redemption among juvenile offenders, remains under-explored. Most existing research concentrates on academic proficiency rather than the broader psychosocial impacts of literacy on this unique population (Ellis & Bowen, 2017).

2.14.2 Executive Functions and Literacy Development

The interconnectedness of executive functions and literacy development is well-documented (Diamond, 2013; Cartwright, 2012), but there is a need for more targeted research on how strengthening executive functions might be associated with accessing reading support and interventions for juvenile offenders. Current literature does not adequately address the bi-directional benefits to executive function and the process of learning to read.

2.14.3 Empathy and Rehabilitation

The role of empathy in the rehabilitation of juvenile offenders is recognised (Decety & Meyer, 2008; Cristofani et al., 2020), yet there is insufficient research on how reading and literacy

interventions specifically foster empathy in this group. While fiction reading has been shown to enhance empathy (Mar et al., 2006; Bal & Veltkamp, 2013), studies that examine this process within the context of juvenile justice are sparse. The potential of reading to reshape self-narratives and promote a redemptive identity is not fully explored in relation to young offenders.

2.14.4 Longitudinal Impacts of Literacy

There is a lack of longitudinal studies investigating the long-term impacts of literacy interventions on juvenile offenders. Research tends to focus on short-term outcomes, leaving a gap in understanding how sustained engagement with literacy can influence long-term behavioural and psychosocial outcomes, such as recidivism rates and successful reintegration into society.

2.15 Relevance and Contribution of the Current Study

2.15.1 Holistic Approach to Literacy Interventions

This study aims to fill the gap by adopting a holistic approach to literacy interventions, focusing not only on academic proficiency but also on the broader impacts on self-worth, personal redemption, and rehabilitation among young offenders. By examining the psychosocial benefits of learning to read, this research can provide a more comprehensive understanding of literacy's role in juvenile justice.

2.15.2 Interplay of Executive Functions and Literacy

By exploring how executive functions support and are supported by literacy development in juvenile offenders, this study can offer insights into tailored interventions that address cognitive deficits and enhance reading skills. Understanding this interplay can lead to more effective strategies that improve both literacy and executive functioning in this population.

2.15.3 Empathy Development through Reading

This research will investigate how reading, particularly fiction, can foster empathy among juvenile offenders, contributing to their rehabilitation and personal growth. By focusing on the emotional and psychological impacts of reading, this study can highlight the potential of literacy interventions to support the development of empathy and pro-social behaviours in young offenders.

2.15.4 Long-term Impact Assessment

The study gives insight into the long-term impacts of learning to read, and how sustained engagement with reading influences behavioural outcomes. Longitudinal insights will be critical for developing policies and programs that promote lasting change.

2.15. 5 Addressing Marginalisation and Educational Disparities

By examining the transformative potential of literacy in marginalised youth within the juvenile justice system, this research can contribute to addressing educational disparities and supporting social inclusion. The study's findings can inform practises that mitigate the effects of marginalisation and promote positive educational and improved social outcomes for young offenders.

Overall, this study aims to bridge significant gaps in the literature by providing a nuanced understanding of the multifaceted impacts of learning to read for a juvenile offender that include executive functions and cognitive development, increase self-worth and the development of empathy.

2.16 Chapter Summary

The chapter explores the literature around the factors considered to influence juvenile offending and educational disparities. An overview of educational disparities in juvenile offending and the current strategies to reduce recidivism is provided. The risk factor paradigm, used to determine the risk of recidivism is introduced, categorising risk factors into individual, social, and community levels. Protective factors that mitigate these risks are discussed, followed by the critical role that academic failure plays in perpetuating marginalisation and juvenile delinquency. The chapter then examines the readiness gap in education and the significance of oral language development in early childhood. The connection between self-esteem and reading proficiency is explored, along with the transformative potential of learning to read. It addresses the interplay between executive functioning, empathy, and reading, emphasising their collective impact on juvenile behaviour and educational outcomes and finally, the effects of marginalisation on adolescent development

CHAPTER 3

Theoretical Framework and Methodology

3.1 Theoretical Framework

This thesis explores Ryan's, the participant, school experiences through recognition theory, which provides a relational framework for understanding social issues and their historical context (Moensted, 2022). Rooted in critical theory with an emancipatory intent, it draws on the works of Honneth (1996, 2004), Taylor (1995), and Fraser (2000), who argue that personal autonomy is achieved through recognition from significant others (Murphy, 2010). This framework helps understand how barriers to success and acceptance at school impacted on the participant's life (Honneth, 2014) and educational opportunities (Brown & Rodríguez, 2009; Bunting & Moshuus, 2017; Skattebol & Hayes, 2016).

The research question was formulated to explore more deeply how learning to read influenced Ryan's development and identity, in light of the marginalisation and isolation he experienced. As a teacher, one sees the tapestry of issues faced by marginalised students and how far reaching the negative effects can be. Conversely, acceptance and success can facilitate significant and rapid positive changes. This approach is therefore informed by the belief that personal growth and autonomy are related to recognition and validation received from others and play a crucial role in successful social interactions (Honneth, 1996).

The research question asks: **"**How has learning to read as a teenager influenced a juvenile offender's perception of himself?" It aims to explore the transformative impact that learning to read had on Ryan's life during and after his time in juvenile detention. Recognition theory posits that personal development, autonomy and identity formation are contingent upon acknowledgment and validation from others (Honneth, 1996, 2004; Taylor,1995). Ryan's story reveals how being acknowledged for his literacy skills by peers, educators, and mentors, but more importantly by himself, contributed to the growth in his personal identity.

The second question specifically seeks out Ryan's narrative about exclusion and marginalisation, both before and after learning to read, and seeks to contribute to a nuanced understanding of juvenile offender rehabilitation in terms of the role of reading in fostering social inclusion and acknowledgment. Recognition theory suggests that marginalised individuals often face a lack of acknowledgment, which hinders their social and educational progress (Honneth, 2014). By detailing Ryan's journey before and after gaining literacy skills, the research can illustrate how reading served as a tool for social inclusion and personal validation, aligning with studies by Brown and Rodríguez (2009), Bunting and Moshuus (2017), and Skattebol and Hayes (2016), that highlight the importance of social recognition in educational success and well-being.

Through Ryan's narrative, the study seeks to uncover how literacy can transform lives and contribute to the rehabilitation and social integration of juvenile offenders. Using this framework

helps build an understanding of how barriers to success and acceptance at school impact students' lives (Honneth, 2014) and educational opportunities (Brown & Rodríguez, 2009; Bunting & Moshuus, 2017; Skattebol & Hayes, 2016).

Honneth's (1996) theory identifies three spheres of recognition: love (self-confidence), rights (self-respect), and solidarity (self-esteem/societal recognition). These spheres are crucial in developing an individual's identity and sense of worth. Friendship, love, and emotional support build self-confidence and identity (Huttunen, 2007), while rights recognition fosters self-respect (Thompson, 2006). Social solidarity enhances self-esteem, but experiences of maltreatment or exclusion can damage self-confidence, self-respect, and self-esteem (Thompson, 2006).

"A teacher's work is a process of receiving and giving recognition" (Huttunen & Heikkinen, 2004, p. 164). Although Honneth has not directly applied this theory to education, it is applicable to educational research. Understanding recognition mechanisms can enhance teaching practices, as authentic recognition is crucial for social interaction and identity formation. Recognition is a fundamental human need, essential for fostering confidence and acceptance (Huttunen & Heikkinen, 2004).

Without emotional support, social esteem, and respect, individuals risk losing their sense of self (Frost, 2016). This loss can result in misrecognition, leading to feelings of devaluation and invisibility (Fraser, 2000). Honneth (1996) highlights that recognition unfolds within relational and conversational contexts, involving speaking, listening, acknowledging, and responding, dynamics crucial in school settings (Graham et al., 2016).

This theoretical perspective informs the analysis, exploring how social relations within schools shaped the student's learning experiences. It highlights how the lack of recognition and empowerment contributed to the participant's marginalisation and crime and how recognition during incarceration fostered positive growth.

Situated at the nexus of education, speech pathology, criminology, social work, and psychology, this study draws insights from diverse disciplines to explore juvenile offending dynamics. Central to its narrative is the story of one man whose path to acceptance and redemption is intertwined with learning to read while in juvenile detention. Key themes and patterns are identified and analysed through research questions and theoretical perspectives to examine how learning to read intersects with the participant's identity, marginalisation, and empowerment.

3.2 Methodology

Narrative inquiry records the experiences of participants and exposes their lived experiences and perspectives, revealing unique perspectives and deeper understanding of situations. It is also

a means of giving voice to rarely heard and marginalised voices (Liamputtong, 2009; Padgett, 2012).

The methodology combines the narratives of the student and the teacher supported by clinical and court documentation to present a multilayered account of the participant's experiences, consisting of:

1. Pre-Literacy Educational Experiences: The participant's school experiences before learning to read via a semi-structured interview, offering insights into challenges preceding his literacy journey and correlating with documents tracking his reading progress in detention.
2. Identifying Change: Examines how literacy acquisition influenced the participant's attitudes, behaviours, and trajectory during incarceration through thematic analysis of interview data.
3. Evaluating Long-Term Impact of Literacy: Focusses on the enduring effects of literacy on the participant's self-worth, behaviour, and empathy development.
4. Teacher Narrative: Explores developing an effective method of teaching reading to juvenile offenders through personal reflections on challenges and transformative experiences.

This thesis posits that the detailed narrative of a single participant, Ryan, alongside the perspective of his teacher, is sufficient to explore the impact of learning to read on a juvenile offender. Ryan, who is at the extreme end of serious juvenile offenders, in many ways represents an amalgamation of the complex issues faced by many young offenders. A detailed examination of his account can provide deep insights into complex phenomena which broader quantitative studies might overlook (Yin, 2018). Ryan's personal story offers a rich, nuanced account of his experiences, allowing for an in-depth analysis of how learning to read impacted his development and identity. While Ryan's experiences are unique to him, they are also representative of broader issues faced by many juvenile offenders. His narrative encapsulates the struggles of marginalisation, exclusion, and the transformative potential of learning to read, making a compelling and illustrative case (Stake, 1995).

The teacher's perspective provides a complementary view that enhances the understanding of Ryan's experiences. Teachers have firsthand knowledge of the educational and social challenges faced by marginalised students, and their observations can validate and contextualise Ryan's narrative (Hattie, 2009). Recognition theory emphasises the importance of individual experiences and interpersonal relationships in personal development and social integration (Honneth, 1996). By focusing on Ryan's story and his interactions within the educational system, the study can effectively explore the dynamics of recognition and its impact on identity and rehabilitation.

Ryan's journey before and after learning to read provides a concrete example of the transformative power of literacy, which aligns with the theoretical framework that highlights the role

of recognition and education in fostering personal growth and social inclusion (Fraser, 2000; Taylor, 1995). Narrative inquiry allows for a detailed exploration of personal stories to understand broader social phenomena, making this method particularly effective for uncovering the nuanced ways individuals make sense of their experiences and how these experiences shape their identities (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). By examining the narratives of Ryan and his teacher, this thesis offers a comprehensive, deeply contextualised exploration of how learning to read impacted the rehabilitation and social integration of a juvenile offender, ensuring that the findings are grounded in real-world experiences (Flyvbjerg, 2006).

3.3 Researcher positionality

My positionality as researcher significantly influenced the understanding and interpretation of data, serving as both a narrative inquirer and an autoethnographic participant (Ellis et al., 2011). Recognising the dynamic nature of positionality, I have acknowledged its intricate role in the research process (Cohen & Crabtree, 2006).

Using narrative inquiry emphasised a comprehensive examination of the subject's context, experiences, and subjective realities (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). My background and experiences inevitably shaped the perception and interpretation of the narrative (Bruner, 1991). Thus, maintaining awareness of personal biases, limitations, and perspectives throughout the research process was crucial (Merriam, 2015).

Transparent acknowledgment of potential areas of bias allows readers to evaluate the validity of inferences drawn from the data (Altheide & Johnson, 1994). Incorporating an autoethnographic component added another layer to my positionality, providing firsthand accounts and reflections that offered a personal lens into the research context (Ellis et al., 2011). Navigating the dual role of researcher and participant required constant reflexivity and acknowledgment of subjectivity in interpreting data (Ellis et al., 2011).

I acknowledge the potential biases of privilege, including being a white, middle-class professional woman with a high value on education, an academic background, and two decades of teaching experience in special education and literacy programs for disenfranchised youth. These aspects were conscientiously considered throughout the research (Bochner, 2001; Daiute & Lightfoot, 2003).

3.4 Qualitative Research

Qualitative research was chosen for this thesis as it allows for an in-depth exploration of individuals' experiences and perceptions, crucial for understanding complex social phenomena (Flick, 2022; Creswell & Poth, 2018). Qualitative methods capture the nuances of participants'

stories, including struggles and transformations (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). These methods are particularly effective for examining dynamic processes over time, such as the longitudinal narrative central to this thesis, providing rich, contextualised insights into the impact of learning to read on this juvenile offenders' rehabilitation and personal growth (McKibben & Breheny, 2023; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

3.5 Ethical Considerations

Addressing the ethical considerations in this study, particularly given the participant's vulnerability (Johnson, 2020; Smith, 2015), was crucial (see preface). It was essential to safeguard the participant's rights and well-being, especially as he was the sole participant (Webster et al., 2013).

Informed consent was paramount, particularly since the participant was an incarcerated adult and a former student of mine (Marzano et al., 2016). He was informed of his right to participate freely, withdraw without repercussions, and the nature and purpose of the study (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). Given the unique challenges in obtaining informed consent in a carceral setting (Nusbaum et al., 2017), efforts were made to ensure he fully understood the study's implications, risks, and benefits. The consent information was read aloud to account for potential literacy barriers, ensuring sensitivity and respect for the participant's autonomy and consideration of power dynamics (Nusbaum et al., 2017).

Confidentiality was a critical concern (Pietila, 2020), and precautions were taken to protect the participant's privacy and prevent potential harm (Eldridge et al., 2011). All data was de-identified and securely stored, with careful management of information shared with correctional staff to minimise potential repercussions (American Psychological Association, 2011).

Establishing and maintaining trust and rapport were essential (Folayan & Haire, 2023). The prior teacher-student relationship facilitated trust but introduced complexities, requiring careful consideration of power dynamics (Folayan & Haire, 2023). Regular check-ins ensured the participant's ongoing comfort and voluntary participation, with the option to withdraw reiterated (American Educational Research Association, 2011).

The participant's well-being and mental health were considered during and after the interview. The privacy of the interview room resulted in the participant disclosing his poor mental health. With his permission, this was reported to the prison staff to arrange psychological support. Follow-up conversations indicated that the participant was no longer experiencing acute symptoms and was receiving ongoing support.

Lastly, potential impacts on the participant's rehabilitation and parole prospects were ethically

considered (Gomez & Duarte, 2020). Transparency regarding the research's implications was maintained (American Psychological Association, 2011), and measures were implemented to prevent unintended harm to his legal proceedings or prospects for release, including providing a positive appraisal of his cooperation (Gomez & Duarte, 2020).

3.6 Autoethnographic reflections

Being both the researcher and narrating the teacher's perspective, this research has an autoethnographic element. The dual focus of individual and the broader cultural contexts are highlighted through reflecting on personal experiences, personal narratives, ethnographic insights, (Ellis et al., 2011).

While this research primarily focuses on the participant's narrative, a secondary autoethnographic perspective is included to contextualise his story. This provides a self-reflective account of teaching in a juvenile detention facility and its relation to the participant's experience. Typically, autoethnography integrates personal and cultural analysis to explore societal phenomena (Ellis et al., 2011). Here, it integrates my reflections into the social context of the participant to provide study-specific insights (Denzin, 2014).

This narrative adds depth by providing additional context and insight into the experiences within the broader study context (Denzin, 2014). This personal perspective enhances understanding and allows for a more nuanced analysis of the participant's experiences. It fosters transparency and reflexivity by openly acknowledging my positionality and biases, helping mitigate potential bias sources (Charmaz, 2020). Additionally, it retells Ryan's story from a second perspective, creating more reliable empathetic insight into their connected journeys (Ellis et al., 2011).

3.7 Research Sites

This study originated in 2010 at a juvenile detention centre's school, where, in the role of special education teacher, I systematically collected reading and behaviour data, extensive observations, interviews, and assessments within this controlled environment to explore literacy education among detained teenagers. This data supports the current research. Follow-up interviews in 2023 with the participant, now in an adult prison in Adelaide, provided retrospective insights on the long-term impact of his teenage literacy education within the juvenile justice system. This dual-site approach comprehensively examines the participant's trajectory from juvenile detention to adult incarceration.

3.8 Participants

As a former teacher in a juvenile detention facility, I bring a distinct perspective to this research, intimately acquainted with the challenges of delivering education in this environment and empathetic to the students' struggles. While the primary focus remains on amplifying the student's voice, my role is not passive. Through my recollections of working with students and teaching reading, I actively contribute to the narrative as an additional participant.

Where the emphasis of the research is on depth and detail rather than participant quantity, deMarrais (2004) argues for a smaller number of participants to achieve a deeper understanding. This ‘less is more’ philosophy emphasises the importance of focusing on the depth of participant experiences to avoid superficial analysis (deMarrais, 2004, p. 61).

The participant was chosen with the expectation that his narratives would contribute in-depth knowledge to the study. Selected from a pool of adult male former juvenile offenders detained in the South Australian juvenile detention facility in Adelaide between 2007 and 2019, specific criteria (see 3.9 below) were established to choose the participant, drawing from established sampling techniques, and rationalising the selection process (Schwandt, 2014).

3.9 Selection

To identify potential participants, a retrospective analysis of reading records from the local Juvenile Detention Centre was conducted and given the unique context and characteristics of the study population; it was necessary to establish specific inclusion criteria to ensure a focused and meaningful exploration of the participant's experiences in the juvenile justice system. These criteria were informed by both empirical research findings and practical considerations, aligning with the qualitative nature of the study.

The initial selection criteria for participants in this study were established to ensure a focused and meaningful exploration of the journey through literacy acquisition within the context of a male teenage offender's detention. The criteria are as follows:

1. Male Offenders: The selection was limited to male juvenile offenders based on research indicating that males are 1.83 times more likely than females to face reading difficulties (Quinn, 2018). Furthermore, low achievement in reading and writing is predictive of recidivism in males but not in females (Thompson & Morris, 2013).
2. Reading Age Discrepancy: Potential participants needed to have a documented reading age that was more than five years below their chronological age at the time of their initial detention. This criterion indicated significant reading difficulties as a starting point for tracking progress.
3. Long-Term Specialised Reading Support: Participants must have engaged in specialised

reading support for a period exceeding 18 months during their detention. This criterion was crucial to reflect substantial learning progress during detention and ensure the participant's sobriety. Short-term interventions, common in brief detentions, were not considered as most of the youths available for selection were only attending school while being detained.

4. Documented Progress: Evidence of documented reading progress was essential to substantiate genuine learning and differentiate it from incidental improvements due to prolonged sobriety. This also facilitated tracking progress milestones with implications for overall well-being and behaviour.
5. Attainment of Reading Age: Participants were required to achieve a reading age of 11.0 years or greater during detention. This threshold marked functional reading proficiency, allowing for reflection on changes in functionality.

Many potential participants were excluded from the selection pool due to their frequent use of methamphetamines and the associated neuropsychiatric symptoms, such as anxiety, psychosis, hallucinations, and memory impairment (Meredith et al., 2005). Reading data showed that improvements made in reading during short-term detention were often nullified as a result of lifestyle choices once released (YEC, 2019).

The choice of the 2014-2019 data from the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare aimed to avoid the skewed representation caused by the COVID-19 pandemic's impact on incarceration rates. During 2014-19, an average of 57.4 youths aged 10-17 were detained daily, with detention periods typically ranging from one to six months, averaging around 12 weeks. According to the state’s Young Offenders Act 1993 (29(4) the maximum juvenile sentence is three years, except in cases of homicide, where "imprisonment for life" is mandated (Darby, 1994).

The initial pool was sizable but was substantially reduced as many were repeat offenders. Approximately five youths annually received sentences exceeding two years leaving approximately 15 suitable individuals. Since the study focuses on learning to read in juvenile detention, those with sentences under 18 months and long-term detainees with an initial reading age over 11.0 years were excluded. Purposive sampling was then used to select final participants, enabling targeted data collection essential for the study's objectives (Merriam, 1998, 2015; Patton, 2002; Creswell et al., 2007; Thorne, 2008).

Initially, seven potential participants meeting the inclusion criteria were identified from reading records of long-term juvenile detainees. Efforts were made to contact them, but the list decreased to three after discovering four were ineligible. One was a missing person, another in a mental health facility, a third had returned to the APY lands, and the fourth was deceased. This attrition rate reflects the cohort's high-risk nature. Only three potential participants remained, with one declining to participate. The other two received information materials and agreed to interviews

initially, but one was later excluded due to unreliability. However, despite this he consented verbally for his de-identified data and notes to be included if necessary. This left one participant, leading to the decision to use a narrative inquiry approach. This approach allowed for an in-depth exploration of the participant's experience, aligning with the study's aim to deeply analyse and represent individual experiences (Johnson et al., 2020; Miles & Huberman, 1994).

Finding only one student participant was disappointing but not unexpected. However, it led to a valuable re-evaluation of the research approach. Despite the limitation, focusing on a single student enabled a detailed exploration of his experiences, aligning with the study's aim for depth rather than breadth. Incorporating the teacher's perspective alongside the student's provided a multi-layered understanding, enriching the narrative and offering a holistic view of the research topic. What was initially seen as a constraint emerged as a methodological strength, allowing for nuanced exploration and deeper insights through an autoethnographic lens (Johnson et al., 2020; Miles & Huberman, 1994).

3.10 Data Collection Methods

Narrative inquiry encompasses two main approaches: analysis of narratives and of narrative reasoning. Narrative reasoning involves constructing narratives from data to represent a phenomenon or event. Essentially, a narrative describes experiences over time and relates them to the cultural or environmental context. Narrative interviews differ from traditional structured interviews by prompting participants to recount their stories rather than answering specific questions. This approach is crucial as stories are fundamental to how individuals understand and navigate their lives, and how cultures sustain themselves over time (Lai, 2010).

Grounded in the fundamental principles of narrative inquiry, which prioritise understanding individuals' lived experiences and perspectives (Bochner, 2001), purposive sampling and semi-structured interviews are effective methodologies for narrative inquiry, particularly in enabling Ryan to tell his story.

Purposive sampling allows the selection of a participant who had experienced or been involved in the phenomenon of interest, in this case, Ryan (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Given the nuanced and personal nature of narratives, purposive sampling ensures that participant(s) can provide rich and detailed accounts that are essential for a comprehensive understanding. Having Ryan provide his unique insights into his experiences, motivations, and challenges there is a deeper contribution to the understanding of the narrative.

Semi-structured interviews complemented the purposive sampling by providing a flexible yet focused approach to data collection (Daiute & Lightfoot, 2003). These interviews allowed for open-ended exploration of participant’s story while maintaining a degree of structure to ensure that key

topics were addressed. In the context of narrative inquiry, using semi-structured interviews enabled me to prompt the participant to recount his experiences, emotions, and reflections in his own words (Riessman, 1993). This approach facilitated the emergence of a rich and authentic narrative, allowing Ryan to narrate his story in his own voice, providing valuable insights into his lived experiences.

Educational research benefits from these methods (Hamilton et al., 2008), in capturing students' diverse narratives, challenges, strategies, and factors influencing academic journeys. These approaches align with the spirit of participatory research, empowering participants and fostering collaboration (Hamilton et al., 2008).

To ensure a comprehensive exploration, this study employed Patton's (1987) and Merriam's (2009) six types of questions for interviews: experience and behaviour, opinion and belief, feeling, knowledge, sensory, and background/demographic. Open-ended questions, supported by the prior rapport, allowed the participant room for elaboration (Patton, 1987; Merriam, 2009). The semi-structured interviews provided flexibility and fostered collaboration in narrative creation (Fontana & Frey, 2008). This approach facilitated an in-depth exploration of Ryan’s experiences and aligned them to construct a rich narrative (Fontana & Frey, 2008), and the underlying four rationales of this approach:

1. Exploring meaning in the participant's lived world (Kvale, 1996; Langley & Meziani, 2020).
2. Accessing unobservable perspectives is crucial during nuanced processes such as learning to read (Patton, 2023).
3. Providing detailed insights into the impact of learning to read on the participant's life (Merriam, 2016).
4. Enhancing credibility through cross-referencing (Merriam, 2015; Stake, 1995).

Analysis of interview questions ensured alignment with research objectives, facilitating collaborative narrative creation (Fontana & Frey, 2008). This approach played a crucial role in understanding the participant's journey in learning to read, capturing its essence (Fontana & Frey, 2008).

3.11 Accessing the Incarcerated Participant

Accessing an incarcerated participant in an adult prison involved a comprehensive ethical process. Written approval from the Department for Correctional Services' Research and Evaluation Management Committee (REMC) was obtained through the provision of extensive documentation, including an Expression of Interest form, Flinders University Ethics Committee approval, and a letter of authority confirming my affiliation.

After in-principle approval, I was interviewed by the Assistant Director of Strategic Policy, Projects, and Partnerships. Successful completion led to authorization for a full application, including interview questions, consent letters, HREC Ethics approval, and an explanation of the research's alignment with departmental priorities.

Locating the participant, a former juvenile, was challenging. A list including fictitious names was submitted to the REMC to protect his juvenile offender identity. With assistance from the Assistant Director, the participant was located, and entry approval from the prison manager was secured. The participant agreed to engage, leading to a formal request to participate and a letter of introduction.

Due to prison restrictions on electronic devices, permission was sought to use a stand-alone voice recorder for interviews. Detailed documentation and an exemption letter were submitted for approval. The Department of Correctional Services approved the use of the recorder and the interviews, ensuring all ethical, procedural, and security considerations were addressed.

3.12 Interview in Prison Setting

The local prison is the state’s main induction facility, houses over 500 male inmates across various security levels (Department of Correctional Services, 2023). Like the participant, some inmates engage in industry programs such as sign writing and welding, offering structured routines (DCS, 2023).

Entering the prison required extensive documentation and an iris scan. I was permitted to carry only a clear plastic bag with a notepad, pen, and voice recorder. After passing multiple iris-controlled checkpoints, a prison officer escorted me to an interview room equipped with a duress alarm and a voice recorder.

The 90-minute interview was audio-recorded with consent and supplemented by notes. The study, protocols, benefits, withdrawal rights, confidentiality safeguards, and consent forms were explained and signed, with casual conversation re-establishing our previous student-teacher rapport (Patton, 2002).

Using a semi-structured format, the interview explored the participant's experiences of literacy acquisition and reading for pleasure as an adult. Open-ended questions and strategic probing elicited candid responses (Patton, 2002; Smith, 1995). Transcription began immediately and was finalised within two weeks, with cross-referencing transcripts for accuracy. A telephone summary validated the interview due to the impracticality of a physical review (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003; Merriam, 1998).

Initial questions explored the participant's childhood memories and feelings about learning to read as a teenager. Transcriptions included my research notes and identified potential follow-up questions. Summaries of previous discussions were provided to the participant before subsequent conversations to ensure accuracy and clarity, enhancing credibility and rigour in data collection and analysis through "member-checking" (Creswell, 2007; Patton, 2002; Turner & Coen, 2008).

3.13 Document Review

While interviews were the primary data source, a thorough document review complemented and substantiated the participant's statements (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) and provided detailed contextual descriptions (Merriam, 2002). Documents were accessed with permission from the Department for Education, Department of Human Services (Youth Justice), and the participant.

The following documents were analysed:

1. Speech Pathology Assessment (reference redacted): Assessed language impairment at the time of the crime.
2. Forensic Psychology Report: Detailed family history, psychological development preceding the crime, and an IQ test conducted upon admission to the detention facility.
3. Psychiatric Report: Assessed the participant's capacity for responsibility.
4. Psychotherapist Report: Outlined the participant’s childhood support.
5. Youth Justice Report: Summarised the participant's progress during his juvenile sentence.
6. Youth Justice Behaviour Support Framework Data: Documented behaviour infringements in the juvenile detention facility.
7. Department of Education Reading Records: Reading progress over four years.
8. Department of Education Learning Assessment Records: Traced progress in numeracy, writing, and spelling over four years.
9. Manuscript of a Short Story: Semi-biographical piece of 35 pages written by the participant as a teenager, exploring themes of anger, regret, and empathy.

This comprehensive document reviews augmented interview insights, contributing to a nuanced and well-rounded understanding of the participant's journey.

3.14 Data Analysis

The data underwent comprehensive analysis using thematic content analysis, systematically coding the interview data to identify recurring themes and patterns. This iterative process enhanced understanding of nuanced perspectives and contextual factors influencing the relationship between reading and life trajectory (Yin, 2018). Supporting documentation provided additional insights.

Qualitative data analysis involved an ongoing interplay between data collection and scrutiny, aiming to derive meaning rather than merely extract information (Mezmir, 2020; Strauss & Corbin, 1994; Denzin & Lincoln, 2000). Immersing in the interview transcripts allowed internalisation of the data (Creswell, 2017; Shiddike, 2020). Analysis began immediately after the primary interview to identify patterns and guide the subsequent data collection (Strauss & Corbin, 1998).

The data analysis and coding strategies followed Creswell's (2017) recommendations. Open coding was used to identify themes and categories of interest, allowing a comprehensive review of emerging themes. As data analysis lacks a defined starting point and involves deconstructing information to support the aim of understanding the impact of learning to read on the participant (Stake, 2003), this process was necessarily fluid in order to give meaning to both original views and final compilations. Creswell's (2017) six-step recursive data analysis process (pp.185-189) was followed see: Figure 2 below.

Figure removed due to copyright restriction

Figure 2: Creswell’s six-step recursive data analysis (2009)

3.15 Trustworthiness

Ensuring the study's ethical integrity and trustworthiness was paramount. The inquiry incorporated different perspectives and ample evidence (Yin, 2015) while highlighting my active role in interpreting and meaning-making processes (Yazan, 2015). The goal was to understand the participant's perspective without imposing my assumptions onto them (Yazan, 2015).

To establish trustworthiness, the following strategies were employed (Merriam, 2002; Prasad, 2005; Yin, 2009):

3.15.1 Data triangulation

Multiple data sources and collection methods validated the emerging findings, ensuring robustness and reliability

3.15.2 Member checks

The participant was provided with a verbal summary to verify accuracy, enhancing the credibility of the findings

3.15.3 Peer review

A school-based psychologist colleague reviewed the emerging findings, adding another layer of validation

3.15.4 Rich description

Detailed contextualisation of the study added ethical and methodological rigour

To enhance dependability, an audit trail provided a comprehensive account of data collection and analysis procedures, aligning with Malterud's (2001) assertion that explicitly explaining the principles and choices underlying pattern recognition and category foundation is essential in qualitative analysis.

3.16 Data Management and Coding

The study employed data reduction and coding techniques to condense the data into meaningful semantic units and establish connections across various data sources (Creswell & Poth, 2014). Multiple cycles of coding were conducted to identify recurring patterns and explore deeper issues (Creswell & Poth, 2014). Three coding methods were utilised: descriptive, in vivo, and elements of narrative coding.

Descriptive coding summarised interview passages into concise phrases to identify the primary topics, aiding in data comprehension and analysis (Saldaña, 2009). Codes were assigned iteratively based on the research objectives, facilitating manageable data portions for in-depth examination (Saldaña, 2009). This iterative process allowed for a more comprehensive understanding of the data and their potential for further exploration.

The analysis systematically applied descriptive coding techniques to interviews, documentation, and assessment results. Similar codes were combined to generate a comprehensive master list covering various themes such as violence obsession, attitudes toward school, peer dynamics, bullying, empathy, and family influences (Saldaña, 2009). This approach was used across the various data sources.

Obsession with violence "I wasn't like other kids then (1), I knew it. I knew I was different (1) because most kids don't sit there fantasising about cutting someone's throat open or wanting to be a serial killer (2). I wasn't worried about reading (3), I was more worried... more thinking about how many people I could take out in the school in under 20 minutes (2). So, reading, not being able to read didn't bother me as a kid (3), but looking back on it, I should've applied myself at school and I'll tell my mother that (4) I should've tried harder (5)	1. SELF-IMAGE 2. VILENCE 3. ATTITUDE TO SCHOOL 4. FAMILY 5. INSIGHT INTO SELF

Figure 3: Interview excerpt using descriptive coding.

Throughout the data management process, a combination of descriptive and in-vivo coding techniques was iteratively applied (see Figure 3 above). In-vivo coding involved using the participant's own words or phrases as semantic units, developing a deeper connection to the data (Saldaña, 2009). Similar in-vivo codes were consolidated under relevant original codes to streamline the process, ensuring an accurate representation of the participant's language and experiences.

Initial coding identified 63 codes; however, this high level of granularity was too challenging to manage. To reduce this, a code review of the initial list to identify overlapping or redundant codes was undertaken. This was followed by a process to consolidate the codes where similar codes were merged into broader categories and then a theme prioritisation based on relevancy to the research questions.

Early reading experience	Shift in attitude & Academic progress	Understanding the arrest at 14
Family Influence on reading	Starting to read / personal achievement	Reflection on emotions after arrest
Childhood books	Impact of reading on mental health	Emotional impact of bullying
Struggles at school	Development of Empathy	Embracing non-conformity
Avoidance of reading	Autism and Neurodivergence	Limited written material & bail
Lack of interest in story time	Resentment and bullying	Understanding the legal proceedings
Negative perception of reading material	Reasons for being bullied	Rejecting Bail and legal consequences
Impact of personal issues on learning	Attitude towards relationships/ sexuality	Parental presence at legal procedures
Resistance to help	Attitudes towards marriage and children	Isolation / separation from co-offender
Empathy development	Attitudes toward family responsibilities	Interaction with detention centre staff
Autism awareness	Challenges with sensory overload	Acknowledgement of learning support
Escape through reading	Academic achievements of siblings	Importance of compromise in teaching
Reflecting on past	Dark sense of humour	Reading as a coping mechanism
Challenges and milestones	Negative school experiences	Cathartic writing dark poetry and prose
Initial resistance and isolation	Teenage rebellion	Relating to characters in books –
Challenging authority	Teacher challenges	Books vs. Movies
Desire to leave / provoking authority	School suspension for fighting	Imagination vs. Movie representations
External influences on Behaviour	Calmness after committing crime	Harry Potter series
Attempts to be removed from class	Family's reaction to his arrest	Dislike open endings in books
Positive teacher-students relationship	Trauma from parent's reaction	Book selection for reading
Teacher's attitude towards reading	Preference for work over school	Positive and negative experiences of books

Figure 4: Initial codes

Through this code consolidation, overlapping or redundant codes were merged into broader categories, facilitating thematic prioritisation aligned with the research questions. Subsequently,

the data was organised into thematic categories providing a structured framework for analysis (Boes, 2006).

Following multiple rounds of descriptive and in-vivo coding, narrative coding was introduced to uncover underlying patterns and structure the data into a cohesive story. Drawing on literary elements, such as those found in stories, this approach facilitated the creation of a narrative framework reflective of the participant's perspective (Polkinghorne, 1995; Reissman, 2008; Saldaña, 2009).

The emphasis was on capturing the intricacies of the individual's experience. Narrative coding enabled a thorough exploration of the structure, characters, plot, and themes, offering a nuanced understanding of the participant's unique journey. By prioritising the participant's voice, narrative coding preserved authenticity and richness, ensuring his language and perspective remained central to the research (see Figure 5 below).

Interview Transcript:	**Final Narrative:**
I found out through fuckin David and Chris, fuckin that one of the girls in juvie had a thing for me or liked me an awful lot. Fuckin bullshit and they went, "Fuckin, it's not bullshit, we're not lying here," and I thought they were, and then I found out through staff and teachers that she was and I thought, fuck it, I'll give it a crack at a book. I thought, fuck it, you know. Why not, I don't want to come off as a dumb fuck.	*"I thought, fuck it, I'll give it a crack at a book. I thought, you know, why not?"* *"I don't want to come off as a dumb-fuck and I picked up Game of Thrones.*

Figure 5: Narrative coding

Neurocognitive Issues
1. Developmental delays
2. Speech and language
3. ASD

Exposure to violence
1. Between parents
2. Parental punishment
3. Family history
4. Video and video games

Peer interactions
1. Bullying
2. Social skills
3. Attachment disorder
4. Aggressive behaviours

Attending school
1. Changing schools
2. School failure
3. Support for learning
4. Exclusion

Delinquency
1. Truancy
2. Early offending
3. Planning and intent
4. Murder
5. Conviction
6. Juvenile Detention

Figure 6: Outline of categories with supporting codes.

Using these techniques, transcripts, documents, and other data sources were coded and re-coded. Initial codes were generated and condensed, then a master list of the most appropriate codes was created. The master list was then re-coded to develop broader categories, by combining codes with similar meaning (see Figure 6 above).

The data underwent synthesis by arranging them chronologically and identifying recurring patterns and events, such as struggles in school, reading difficulties, social isolation, disruptive behaviour, school expulsion, involvement in violent crime, and the experience of learning to read as a teenager. These experiences tended to cluster in specific phases of the participant's life, revealing narrative elements unique to each phase.

The interview data were systematically coded, identifying key themes that reflect Ryan's transformational journey. Drawing on recognition theory, which emphasises the importance of mutual acknowledgment and respect in social interactions, the analysis revealed how identity, dignity, and inclusion intersect with his experiences of learning to read (Fraser, 2003). The coding process highlighted narrative turns, critical events, and reflections, offering a comprehensive understanding of Ryan's experiences and the catalysts for change. Empathy emerged as a significant theme throughout this process, intersecting with other aspects of his journey. See: Figure 7 below.

Theme	Sub-theme 1	Sub-theme 2	Sub-theme 3
Before incarceration	**Initial resistance and challenges with authority:** Experiences lack of recognition and respect highlights need for acknowledgment.	**Desire for escape influences on behaviour:** Shaped by external influences and a desire for recognition even negative.	**Retaliation to bullying / challenges:** Bullying and a lack of supportive recognition-retaliatory actions, unmet needs for acknowledgment and respect.
Transforming & coping in incarceration	**Discovery of self-worth and coping mechanisms:** Positive relationships aids self-worth, dignity and inclusion	**Positive teacher-student relationships & academic progress:** Supportive recognition from teachers promotes academic and personal growth, reinforcing his identity.	**Learning to cope with challenges / takes risks in learning:** Recognition of efforts encourages resilience and engagement in learning, aids ability to cope with challenges.
Learning to read and developing empathy	**Impact of reading on mental health and personal growth:** Reading facilitated self-recognition and mental well-being, contributing to his personal growth and sense of dignity.	**Developing a sense of empathy:** Through reading and supportive interactions, Ryan develops empathy, learning to recognise and value others' experiences.	**Importance of compassionate teaching in detention:** Validation of identity and potential, fostering empathy and personal development.
Reflections, self-discovery, new perspectives	**Interaction with staff and acknowledgment of support:** Positive interactions with staff and their acknowledgment of his efforts reinforced his sense of recognition and belonging.	**Transformational journey from isolation and defiance to empathy and self-worth:** Shifts from a lack of recognition to mutual respect and self-worth, intertwined with a developing sense of empathy.	**Positive changes in attitude towards education and authority:** Increased recognition and respect for his efforts and identity led to a more positive attitude towards education and authority.

Figure 7: Thematic analysis- Themes and sub-themes

Analysis revealed four distinct chronological transitions for the participant:

1. academic struggles
2. involvement in a violent crime
3. learning to read
4. transformations following literacy acquisition.

These transitions guided the construction of narratives that provided insight into the significance of each phase in the participant's journey (see figure 8 above).

3.17 Analysis of Fiction written by Ryan

A thematic analysis (Creswell & Creswell, 2018) of a story penned by Ryan, likely reflecting his own emotional journey, revealed an interesting exploration of past trauma, familial longing, identity struggles, and emerging empathy. Written approximately two years after the murder, the narrative delves into themes of nostalgia, trauma, identity, and empathy. While not a psychoanalysis the thematic analysis hints at the emotional turmoil Ryan was experiencing at the time (See Figure 8 below).

Figure removed due to copyright restriction

Figure 8: Thematic analysis of Ryan’s fictional writing

Collectively they suggest that with increased self-awareness and recognition for his many successes, he began exploring his own trauma through the use of fictional characters, perhaps revealing of his nascent journey towards empathy.

3.18 Data Representation

A narrative approach inspired by Lawrence Durrell's *The Alexandria Quartet* (Durrell,1957-1960), and its multi-perspective storytelling, integrates elements of the bildungsroman genre, emphasising the protagonist's psychological and moral evolution (Boes, 2006). Ryan's narrative unfolds through various lenses: clinical/courtroom accounts, Ryan's own reflection, and my commentary, are structured with initiation, confrontation, and resolution phases (Boes, 2006). They

are organised chronologically, and encompasses key elements of storytelling, including character development, conflict, climax, and resolution, enabling a comprehensive exploration of Ryan's journey through illiteracy, crime, and incarceration (Boes, 2006). My interjections provide contextual support, illustrating Ryan's conflicts and coping mechanisms. Uninterrupted segments of his story provide insights into his experiences and perspectives.

The final iteration developed overarching themes, each linked to recognition theory, creating a narrative structure reflecting Ryan's growth and self-discovery. Recognition theory, which emphasises the importance of mutual acknowledgment and respect for identity, dignity, and social inclusion, provides a framework for understanding these transformations and highlights how mutual acknowledgment and respect played a crucial role in transforming Ryan's self-worth, empathy, and positive attitudes towards learning and authority.

3.19 Limitations

As a narrative with autoethnographic inclusions, it relies on personal experiences and interpretations (Denzin, 1989) with potential subjectivity and bias, and can raise concerns about reliability and objectivity (Creswell & Poth, 2018). However, the advantages of this type of narrative allows for firsthand accounts that provide a deep and nuanced understanding of complex phenomena (Chase, 2005) and captures otherwise difficult to obtain insights. These enrich the study through the descriptions and personal reflections (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). Additionally, Creswell and Poth (2018) suggest that autoethnographic reflections and subjectivity align well to the interpretivist paradigm which values understanding the subjective perspective of participants.

There are several other limitations associated with narrative inquiry.

3.19.1 Hawthorne Effect

Participants may alter their behaviour because they know they are being studied, potentially distorting the research findings (Hawthorne, 2023). As this was a retrospective study this was not a significant concern although the focus of the study, i.e. learning to read, was known to the participant and that may have influenced his narrative.

3.19.2 Researcher Immersion

Accurate representation is achieved through being deeply embedded in the topic with a comprehensive understanding of the subject's life experience. I was the participant's reading teacher for several years and have a comprehensive understanding of his experience.

3.19.3 Data Volume

The method generates a large amount of data, making it time-consuming to analyse beyond

the interview process.

3.19.4 Focus on Personal Experience

Participants often concentrate on their personal experiences without addressing broader social movements or contexts. Ryan’s personal experience was the priority.

3.19.5 Reliance on Memory

This method depends heavily on the subject’s memory, necessitating triangulation of information. This was achieved by rephrasing questions at different times and examining related documentation. In this case, documentation and the narrative of the teacher provide triangulation of the participant’s recollections.

3.19.6 Sample Size

The sample size of one was focussed on the narrative of a single participant and the results are therefore not generalisable. The intent, however, was to give a narrative that was rich and deep (Flyvbjerg, 2006) to provide a comprehensive and nuanced exploration of Ryan's unique experiences. This approach aligns with the aims of the research, which seeks to explore and highlight the individual human experience within the juvenile justice system and is supported by the inclusion of documentation the teacher’s autoethnographic narrative and documentation.

3.20 Chapter Summary

This section provides an overview of the theoretical framework of recognition theory and its application to this study. It explains the research methods including the choice of narrative inquiry, the ethical considerations with particular note to the difficulties associated with incarcerated persons. The researcher positionalities, of being both the researcher and a former teacher of the participant were identified. It explains why a single participant was used and the selection process, the data collection methods, the analysis technique of thematic analysis, and the considerations of trustworthiness and data representation.

CHAPTER 4

The Paper Trail of a Troubled Past

"The attacker survives the victim only to learn that it was himself that he longed to be rid of. Hatred is self-hatred." Wilder- *The Ides of March*

4.1 Introduction

This quotation encapsulates the internal struggle, self-destructive tendencies and negative self-perception that underlie the participant's actions. In this chapter, the details of his crime and the extensive documentation of his troubled background are examined, highlighting the effects of self-hatred, marginalisation, and unresolved trauma. By integrating diverse forms of documentation, and aligning to recognition theory, this chapter emphasises the importance of acknowledging and validating individual identities and experiences.

This approach also highlights the impact of marginalisation on Ryan's life, reinforcing the need for a more holistic understanding of his circumstances. These documented experiences connect with the central research questions, which focus on understanding the lived experiences of marginalised individuals and the implications for educational practices and contribute to a deeper understanding of the factors that influenced Ryan's educational journey and informing more inclusive and supportive educational strategies.

Within the documentation that chronicles Ryan's background and the court proceedings surrounding the crime, the underlying themes emerge. While the documentation is uncomfortable reading and portrays Ryan as callous, brutal and without any empathy, his narrative reveals the complexities of his life, his inner turmoil, his conflicted and unresolved emotions, feelings of inadequacy, deep-seated self-doubt, self-hatred, and long-term marginalisation.

Thompson (2023) contends that society effectively labels individuals as "beyond redemption" when it limits or removes access to education and abandons the belief that it can contribute to addressing the underlying causes of criminal behaviour. Conversely, by recognising the value of education for offenders, there is a tacit acknowledgement of the potential for learning to contribute meaningfully to the rehabilitation and reintegration of these individuals back into society.

Ryan, as a young teenager was unable to read, unable to write more than a few words, was still using his fingers to add and subtract, had a long history of school failure, suspensions, exclusions, and delinquent behaviours and at the time he was arrested was one of the youngest offenders to have been convicted of an indictable offence. His story is confronting, and his narrative is filled with uncensored expletives, and comes with a content warning.

Despite my familiarity with the details of Ryan's offence and of Ryan, it remains challenging to reconcile the brutality and callousness of his actions with the person I know. I experienced several days of deep and very unsettling melancholy after interviewing him. The cognitive dissonance from trying to hold two contradictory beliefs was profound. I was left numb by the depth

of the tragedy that had unfolded, not only for the victim and her family but for Ryan and all those who had worked with or cared for him. I was particularly saddened by the overwhelming sense of a wasted life that came from seeing the adult Ryan and knowing that half his life has been, and will likely remain for years to come, nothing more than the inside of a prison.

His story was not chosen because of its exceptionality but because it uniquely captures the convergence of risk factors for offending. Viewed through the criminological lens of psychologists and lawyers his is a textbook account of how to create an offender. As a teacher, the story I see is very different, it is one of missed opportunity and profound educational failure. Viewed through the experiences of Ryan, it is a story of anguish, academic failures, unhappiness, family challenges, isolation, and disempowerment that coalesce to become the genesis of a tragedy. It is far more than a record of offending; it is a story of navigating a world that seemed indifferent to his struggles.

His story is explored through three perspectives: the story told through documentation and official reports, his story told through his perspective, and the story told through my perspective as his reading teacher from juvenile detention. This is followed by my discussion of my associated pedagogy that was developed to assist Ryan and others like him to learn to read as teenagers (see Appendix 1), along with the changes that occurred for Ryan over time. This structure allows for a more nuanced understanding of this complex story in relation to the research questions.

4.2 The crime

While the crime is central to Ryan's story, and the fulcrum on which it rests, the details are not the intended focus of this study. However, the events preceding it and those that occurred over the next few years are contextualised by it, and as such, an overview of his crime has been included.

Ryan was just into his teens when he and a friend broke into a home of an elderly person living in a nearby suburb, selected only because he was aware that this person lived alone. They did this with the explicit goal of attacking the occupant. The attack was described by investigators as 'frenzied,' and reportedly, they were shocked by its brutality and callousness. The impact of his crime shocked the community and quickly turned the national spotlight onto the phenomenon of teenage violent crime triggering vitriolic and angry commentary along with the predictable blaming and shaming of family, schools, and support services.

4.2.1 Nota Bene

Reports in the public domain from evidence given in court provide a full and graphic account of the attack, however, only those details deemed necessary to tell Ryan's story have been included. Some of these details have been altered. Other details such as names, places, ages and the sex of the victim have been redacted or changed, the pronoun *they/them* has been used when

referring to the victim (singular), quotations are deliberately unreferenced, and the names of sources have been redacted in order to de-identify Ryan as much as possible (in line with ethical guidelines) without losing the essence of his story. This moment was the central event in Ryan's life. Its brutality, his responses to it, the events before and after, and the magnitude of his crime contextualise both his commentary and give significant value to the findings.

4.3 Becoming an Offender

Court records indicate that a few days before the attack occurred, Ryan had shared with his teacher, his desire to see someone die, reportedly saying that he thought it would be good to see someone die and declaring that he'd like to stab someone or to shoot someone. The following information has been taken from accounts given in court and on the public record.

On the day the crime occurred, Ryan had been suspended from school following physical assaults on two students. The school's report stated that he had been staring at another student, saying, "I hate that kid, and I'm going to kill him", before running over to the child and punching him in the head. Following the second attack he was sent to a separate room for the afternoon. Becoming increasingly concerned about his father's reaction to his suspension he threatened his teachers with a comment suggesting that if he were suspended, someone would die.

After school, he returned to his home and realising his father was not there he went to a friend's house where together they spent time discussing the now familiar topic of how they might kill someone. The boys identified their potential victim, a person who lived alone in a nearby suburb and decided to visit the home to plan their attack. Although the boys were carrying knives, at that point, they did not harm the person, stating that they "chickened out." Accounts of the timeline differ slightly, but at some stage following this visit the boys spent time practising stabbing boxes in the garage with their knives and debating which one should attack their victim first.

Ryan returned to his home, and after his parent went to bed he went back to his friend's house. They primed themselves with alcohol and spent the next few hours playing *Saints Row*, a video game described by the Entertainment Software Rating Board (2024) as containing "realistic gunfire, large explosions, cries of pain, large blood-splatter effects with the additional 'bonus' that players can perform *finishing off attacks* on enemies e.g., stabbing and/or shooting enemies in the head" and as it turned out, a somewhat prophetic description of the events that were to follow. At some point during this period Ryan declared that they were going to kill someone that night.

Early in the morning, well before sunrise, the boys headed back to their intended victim's house, however, this time, Ryan was carrying a long-bladed hunting knife hidden under his hoodie. Arriving at the victim home the boys broke a glass panel, hoping the occupant would investigate. On opening the door to confront the boys Ryan immediately began attacking the resident, with it

quickly escalating into a prolonged and frenzied attack- the victim eventually sustaining many dozens of injuries.

The court record of Ryan's account states**:**

> I walked up to the (victim's) house alone, up to the sliding door and they came out through the wooden door. They asked what I wanted, and I said I was drunk, and (then) I put the knife in their stomach. I tried to stab them twice in the stomach, and then I kept stabbing them in the head. They tried to hold their arms up to keep me from stabbing them. They were screaming. They were about to shut the door on me, so I threw the rock at them at the door- it was a big chunk of rock. I ran through the door and kept stabbing them until they were on the floor, making no sound. The last thing I did was throw the lump of concrete at their head.

Ryan left the house, went back to his friend and said, “I did it.” Both boys entered the victim’s house leaving fingerprints and footprints before heading back to Ryan’s home where they attempted to clean off the blood from their skin and clothes. Ryan hid the knife, then an hour later went to bed and slept soundly until about 10.00 am the following morning. On rising he says he listened to rap music and went on as usual stating that he gave little thought to what he had done and didn’t really think too much about it again. He was arrested and charged with the murder the following day.

4.4 Background Information

The following background information was used with Ryan’s permission. Some details have been altered to maintain his anonymity.

Ryan was born to a working-class Australian family. He had a history of several medically unexplained developmental difficulties relating to his low birthweight, poor speech development and behavioural difficulties throughout primary school. As a child he was considered ‘different’ and was the target of relentless bullying and marginalisation by his peers, likely exacerbated by his poor social skills and difficulties relating to teachers. Several changes of school further disrupted his early childhood, as did the frequent moving back and forth between his parents who had separated when he was very young.

Psychiatric support was sought for Ryan at a very early age (before pre-school), where it was considered that he was developing a Conduct Disorder and an Oppositional Disorder. By the time he was in Year one, he was being supported for his preoccupation with themes around aggression, killing and power. His psychologist believed that these were likely to be a reaction both to domestic violence and the acrimonious separation of his parents, exacerbated by his exposure to violence and aggression in the virtual world. The desensitising effects of this exposure was considered by his psychologist to be due to Ryan's tendency to objectify others and was further aggravated by his exposure to pornography from a relatively young age (reference redacted).

In primary school, it was noted that Ryan had significant learning difficulties, was easily

distracted, had difficulty concentrating and exhibited frequent challenging behaviours. He saw himself as an outcast and believed himself different from other children because he was frequently "told off", felt ostracised by peers and believed he lacked intelligence. He displayed a limited ability to respond to difficult situations and that this was particularly evident when he was bullied, as he tended to react aggressively and violently. His parents sought additional assistance for his problem behaviours from psychologists, counsellors, and other health professionals (reference redacted).

4.5 Initial Psychometric Testing

Ryan's IQ was assessed by a psychologist using the Weschler Abbreviated Scale of Intelligence (WASI), on admission to detention, which placed him in the extremely low to borderline range of intelligence, or in the first percentile for his age. Both his verbal and non-verbal intelligence were low suggesting his intellectual difficulties were in the realm of mild mental retardation (as described by the DSM-IV diagnosis). His spelling as a teenager was assessed to be at the level of a 5-year-old and his reading on par with a 6-year-old (reference redacted).

On testing his executive functioning (on admission) the psychologist remarked that Ryan showed a "startling incapacity" to cope with competing demands of a task, commenting that his results were the worst he'd seen in his career. It was noted that Ryan had poor problem-solving skills, low general knowledge, poor academic functioning, that he gave up quickly when tasks were difficult, had a fear of failing, was highly distractible, had poor concentration and importantly, once he had something in mind to do, he would find it difficult to entertain a competing idea or could analyse the consequences of his actions during the commission of the act (reference redacted).

Ryan's poor social skills, aggression and need to portray a powerful persona often resulted in him hurting others. Significantly, it was noted that he had emotional callousness, a tendency to objectify others, and a profound lack of empathy towards others. The psychologist concluded that the central focus of psychological interventions during his incarceration should aim at developing empathy (reference redacted).

4.6 Speech and Language Assessment (accessed with Ryan's permission)

The standard Australian Clinical Evaluation of Language Fundamentals-4 (CELF-4) assessment was administered to Ryan shortly after he was incarcerated. Of the ten subtests his results were below average in nine. He was diagnosed with moderate difficulties in understanding spoken language, moderate difficulties in producing spoken language, mild difficulties with the content of spoken language (vocabulary and concept development), and mild difficulties in applying working memory to spoken language.

These results indicated that he would have specific difficulties with:

1. Following verbal or written directions and understanding the order of actions/instructions. Following oral instructions
2. Recalling strings of information e.g. days of week, months of the year
3. Sequencing events or identifying the main idea in information
4. Understanding the relationship between words, the meaning of words, synonyms and antonyms
5. Using appropriate conjunctions
6. Participating in classroom activities

More generally, this indicated that Ryan would also have poor social cognition, i.e., the processing and application of behaviours that establish and maintain interpersonal relationships and an inability to process the verbal and non-verbal content of face-to face encounters which could lead to impulsive and ill-considered responses (Snow & Powell, 2012).

4.7 Magistrate's Sentencing Remarks

At the conclusion of the trial, the presiding Magistrate expressed concern about Ryan's prospects for rehabilitation stating the need to protect the community from further violence, adding that in her opinion the premeditated, senseless, and savage nature of his crime placed it in the very highest end of seriousness. She believed the information made available to her from the psychological reports helped her understand what might have prompted the heinous crime, acknowledging that once Ryan had fixated with the idea of attacking the victim that was the only idea he was able to contemplate. She called the attack a callous and a cold means to an end, suggesting that it was all about Ryan regaining power, and that Ryan would require many years of treatment to protect the community from any further violence.

The Magistrate referred to forensic psychology/psychiatry reports that concluded Ryan suffered from a conduct disorder, with four factors identified as contributors to the offence

1. Ryan's low level of cognitive functioning put him in the range of mild mental retardation (terminology used in report). The court heard this made it difficult for him to perform academically and impaired his ability to socialise. It made him unable to evaluate the consequences of his actions and what he wanted to do.

2. His exposure to domestic violence at an early age had led to aggressive and disobedient behaviours.

3. He was subjected to bullying at school and was ostracised by his peers, which contributed to him becoming a social outcast. He developed significant anger and hatred toward people and low empathy for others.

4. Ryan’s continued exposure to violent video games and movies decreased his emotional empathy and that his recollection of his offending was through a distant perspective, similar to that of an observer. The psychologist stating that Ryan’s lack of empathy toward his victim and lack of revulsion about the blood at the scene were because he had become desensitised by blood and gore that he experienced in violent video games and movies.

4.8 Chapter Summary

In this chapter, a comprehensive exploration of Ryan's background is presented through a selection of documents from psychologists, speech pathologists, court records, and psychometric testing both from early childhood and at the beginning of his incarceration. A short overview of the crime is also included along with the sentencing remarks of the magistrate summarising his complexities. This diverse evidence provides some understanding of Ryan's cognitive, emotional, and communicative capacities, as well as the social and legal contexts of his experiences. It summarises that at the time of the crime and his entry into juvenile detention Ryan had been assessed as having a conduct disorder, extremely low cognitive abilities, problems with executive function including working memory and ability to make decisions, speech and communication difficulties, a long history of exposure to extreme violence and social isolation/ marginalisation, while his literacy and numeracy were nearly a decade below his chronological age.

CHAPTER 5

Hidden Struggles, Silent Battles

"She was struggling, as she had always struggled, not to show what she could do but to hide what she couldn't do." B. Schlink, *The Reader*

5.1 Introduction

This quote reflects on the life of Hanna Schmitz, in Bernard Schlink's novel, *The Reader* and resonates deeply with Ryan's experience, as he narrates his own story in this chapter. Like Hanna's struggle with illiteracy, Ryan struggles with his own insecurities and fears of exposure. His story highlights how these struggles shaped his actions and parallel his transformation through learning, towards greater self-acceptance.

Recognition theory stresses the importance of acknowledging and validating an individual's identity and experiences and is central to understanding Ryan's educational challenges and his journey towards independence, literacy, empowerment, and ultimately, personal growth. As Ryan's narrative unfolds it underscores not only the significance and empowering effect of learning to read but also illustrates how societal recognition can change lives.

5.2 Ryan's Story

I first met Ryan in my capacity as a special education teacher when he was detained in the local youth detention centre, having been arrested for and charged with murder. I worked closely with him during the years he spent in the juvenile justice system. Due to his complex needs, for the first four months of his incarceration I was his only teacher.

Aware of his crime, I recall being surprised by how small he was physically and could see through his bravado that he was overwhelmed. He told me the other boys had already made threats to him but "he'd take 'em all out if he had to." I spent an hour or so with him initially chatting and taking notes about his interactions in preparation for introducing him to the school. My notes from that meeting commented on his immaturity, his conflation of fact and fiction (e.g. I met Princess Diana- he was a toddler at the time of her death, I rode a dolphin underwater – a scene from a Disney movie), his propensity to jump from one topic to another, and mannerisms that are commonly associate with children with ASD, although he had not been diagnosed as autistic.

I remained closely involved with him as his education case manager for the duration of his juvenile detention, and as he transferred to the adult corrections system, I made several transition visits - customary practice for long term juvenile transfers. Ryan eventually went on to consider me as one of his few trusted adults, although I had discontinued contact with him beyond my professional duties. I had not seen him until the interview for this project more than a decade later.

I was unsure of how I would be received by Ryan, fearing he would see me as an intruder into his world. However, the "reunion" was easy. Ryan was visibly happy to see me, his face beaming as he entered the interview room. It had been a long time since he had received a visitor, and he was eager to talk and engage in general conversation, proudly showing me his tattoos and seeking my approval. Now almost 30, he had not changed very much, although he was stronger looking and moved with the insolent swagger common to many long-term prisoners. His demeanour (once settled) was calmer and more confident than I had remembered, and his interactions were now much more adult.

He started by telling me that he had been looking forward to seeing me since the prison manager had approached him about participating in this project, telling me that he “couldn't wipe the smile off my face.” I was relieved that he was happy to participate in the interview as it would facilitate open and frank conversation but also saddened by the realisation that my visit meant so much to him. He reminded me that I knew all about him and would be able to call him out if he started "bullshitting", a reference to my level of access to his personal, psychological, and some medical records during the period of his juvenile detention.

The interview was supported by the prison manager, who had ensured that my access to interviewing and spending time with Ryan was unimpeded. We were given a small private room within Ryan's cell block, and although we were unsupervised, I was given a duress alarm and was visible to the warden, who remained outside during the interview. Ryan sat across from me at a small, grubby table with the recording device placed on the table between us. He was keen to try it out and spent a few moments playing with the voice recorder as if it were a new toy. Although I had booked a 90-minute visit, the interview ran over two hours, only concluding when Ryan was required to attend the lunchroom.

Throughout the interview, Ryan was cooperative, thoughtful, and reflective about his answers and asked that I return to show him the transcript, later confessing that he didn’t really want to read it but would like me to visit him again. When discussing permissions and anonymity I was surprised by his request not to be given a pseudonym. On questioning this he explained that now, as an adult, he did not feel the need to hide behind a “fake name” and wanted to show people that he was prepared to take responsibility for his actions. This request, however, was at odds with the ethics approvals given for this project and, as such, a pseudonym has been maintained.

While the violent offence committed by Ryan is central to his story, he was not asked to discuss any details of the crime but to provide his perspective about the events before and after it occurred.

5.3 Before the Crime

Ryan began by telling me that, since he had been in Year One, he had been obsessed with wanting to kill someone. This obsession with violence and killing had been fuelled by the hours spent playing violent video games, an activity he shared with his co-accused. Both the judge and the psychologist had commented on the impact these video games had had on Ryan's state of mind. During the interview he reflected on this point and agreed that exposure to violent games and movies in conjunction with his anger and the bullying he was experiencing influenced his thinking to the point that he saw violence, particularly using knives, as a solution to the misery he felt at school.

> I think it (video games) was part of it, I put two and two together… I knew I couldn't get a gun but "knives, knives are fuckin' everywhere!

He continued:

> I wasn't like other kids; I knew it; I knew I was different. You know, threatening to stab someone is pretty full-on for a fuckin' six or seven-year-old… most kids don't sit there and fantasise about cutting someone's throat open or wanting to be a serial killer," Ryan reflected. "(In school) I wasn't paying attention- I was thinking about how many people I could take out in the schoolyard in under twenty minutes." Ryan sighed. "Like, y' know, I wasn't right.

Recalling the events leading to his suspension on the day of the attack, Ryan's version of the school yard fight was that it had not been a spontaneous attack but had been in response to bullying. He detailed how he was feeling.

> I was angry. I was in a rage... They were laughing at me… Then they started mouthing off, and I went, 'keep going fucker, and I'll smash your fucking teeth in. I seen him laughing and pointing, so I just ran up, bang, hooked him, fucking gave him a nice fucking left hook. I got suspended for it, and I was pissed off about it. I was angry. I got suspended, … yeah, I hit him, but he was laughing…

Describing how the school dealt with him after the assault, Ryan goes on to say:

> Yeah, I was in a rage… I sat in the focus room for the last two hours of school, just getting angrier. Yeah, I just sat there just flipping the fuck out, just angry. I put my headphones on and listened to angry music. Listened to Eminem, 50 Cent … all the angry songs.

Later that evening Ryan committed the offence. While there was no discussion about the actual crime (Ryan being aware of my familiarity with the details) I did, however, ask him about his thoughts before and after. His recollections indicative of the degree of social impotence and marginalisation that had featured in his life up to that point. His chilling description of his feelings on returning home illustrating the sense of empowerment he felt following the attack. "You know, straight after it, it was like…, I felt like God."

Explaining further he said:

> That was the problem; I had no thoughts, no nothing; I was calm. My heartbeat wasn't racing; it was beating normally… and I had just committed the worst thing possible… even immediately after the crime, I was psychologically dead calm, like it was weird. It's weird, like looking back on it, it was

> fuckin' scary…I think I let everything out. Like all that anger, all that rage, all the hate, everything that come out of me, yeah, and after that, like, … I was calm.

He continued:

> But after I got home, you know, '(I was feeling) pretty normal. I was just having an average (normal) day, you know, I was calm after it. The weird thing is after I committed it, … the fuckin' DPP facilitator … tried saying I was in shock, and I said (no) I know what shock is; I've been in shock. Shock, you don't function the way I did. No. You don't have the level, clear head I had. Shock- you shut down; you don't function.

> She asked me how I was feeling, and I said I was neither happy nor angry, or sad or mad or fuckin' anything! I was dead. I said I felt nothing; I was empty inside, but I functioned. I was calm. Like dead calm, like scary calm.

Ryan goes on to say that the sense of calm he felt following the attack remained with him even after he had been arrested. He acknowledged that it was not until he saw his father crying that he became an "emotional wreck", made worse by hearing his mother crying on the phone.

5.4 Early School Experience

Ryan was aware that he was not doing as well as other students from as early as Year One. While he did not remember Reception being problematic, he recalls struggling in class once reading and spelling tasks were introduced.

> Yeah, I couldn't do it. I just sat there and was just looking and being told like- you're doing it. And I'm like, I can't read it!

> I remember Year 1, … but yeah, I couldn't - the classes when we'd learn to try to spell or read or had to do 15 minutes of silent reading… I just sat there and played with the figurine I had. Then they said, well, at least that was silent, and I thought, killer (great), I don't have to read.

Being “managed” for his behaviour rather than his learning issues became his normal. Reflecting on why he felt reluctant to engage with reading, he said:

> Reading was hard, yeah, I didn't like it. It confused the shit out of me. English, spelling, reading, I'd try, but then I'd just sit there… I didn't want to read. I didn't care, I think being bullied and not wanting to be at school or any of that shit. I just hated school.

Ryan explained that sometimes he would receive assistance from other students but that he really needed more help from the teacher. He had little motivation to engage with learning and was reprimanded with comments like “not learning to read would ruin his life" but felt he was not adequately supported to learn. Describing how his perception of his abilities influenced his level of cooperation he said that he was willing to attempt activities that he perceived he was good at, such as numeracy, but was always reluctant to engage with literacy-based schoolwork and increasingly used behavioural tactics to avoid having to do these tasks.

> Schoolwork, I hated it… I did. I found it taxing. Like I was good at math, I was acing maths and could smash that out. I was happy to do maths. Yeah, I was really good at it. Like it was math - maths was always easy as a kid. I wouldn't muck up; I'd get it done.

Removal from class was either the result of behavioural issues or allocated time to work with a Student Support Officer (SSO) away from the classroom. He recalls using his disruptive behaviour to escape the academic demands of the classroom more frequently as he fell further behind his peers and the associated bullying increased. When asked if he felt there was any connection between his behaviour had reading Ryan explained:

> Yeah probably, nah there definitely was. I'm sitting there and people are doing their work and I'm sitting there just looking at them, and, hmm I couldn't do it. So, then I'd just go and annoy people… while they're trying to learn, and I'm just like, well, let's fuck around, then (I'd hear) Ok, Ryan, time out.

This became a pattern.

> I was in and out of class 90 per cent of the day, and it got worse as I got older; I'd just sit out, sit in a corner somewhere daydreaming or just be told to be quiet and stop disrupting the other kids from their work. They'd give me a toy or something like an action figure.

His disruptive behaviour was increasingly 'rewarded' by being removed from class and, by default, exempted from doing the tasks he found challenging. This point will be revisited later in the interview as Ryan reflects on how and why a different approach to engaging him in reading was ultimately successful in juvenile detention. The following comment revealing both his need to escape and his need for positive attention.

> I didn't care about getting removed; one-on-one sitting there with a fucking support teacher's a killer (good). I loved it. Oh, that was the best. It is out of the class, and it's entirely focused on me. You've got 40 minutes to an hour, sometimes half an hour depending on the work schedule, and it's entirely focused on you.

Unlike the USA, where most states require 'struggling readers' to access a specialist reading teacher with a master's degree or similar in Reading (Dole et al,.2006), many South Australian schools delegate this responsibility to unqualified support staff, resulting in a situation where those with the greatest need, and who have already failed under the tutelage of a qualified teacher, are supported by the least qualified staff members. While SSOs (teaching assistants) play a vital role in schools particularly when reinforcing classroom instruction, students such as Ryan require support and specialist intervention well beyond the expertise of an SSO. Ryan recalls how much he enjoyed the attention and the escape from class but admitted that it was not effective in helping him to learn to read.

> They have 20 kids that they have to do, so you only get half an hour with them. (They'd do) spelling and reading, and they'd sit there and go through the words, spell it out. I couldn't spell it out. They tried, and I had that for the time I was at one primary school.

Time out of class effectively became respite for classroom teachers. During the infrequent times Ryan remained with his class, he was without reading support. When asked how he managed to do the work if he was unable to read it, he replied:

> I didn't! Just didn't. I just fucked around. It didn't bother me… I wasn't worried about reading. I was thinking more about how many people I could take out.

Ryan described his time at school as being "incredibly unhappy" and having no one there to relate to. The response to his behaviours was usually exclusion, and he felt that, in general, "they just tried to manage me".

> I was a "pass-through kid", one of those kids that when you finish the year, he's put up to the next grade, didn't matter if you knew anything; they just wanted me out of their class and not their problem anymore … and that's the sad part.

Trying to illustrate how difficult he felt school had been for him, he compared his treatment at school to his treatment in prison.

> The sad thing is in jail, in the place where technically, I should have fucking been dead by now; I'm bloody well-respected in here. Everyone knows me. Everyone goes like, oh, brother, come here, come play soccer, come here, I want to tell you something. Then outside of that, like out in a normal schoolyard where everyone is meant to have a fair crack at everything, I struggled and failed… and I (as a student) was failed.

On progressing to high school, truancy and in-class behaviours became his norm. Academically, at the level of a six-year-old, he faced an insurmountable gap between his ability level and the classroom expectations. Correspondingly, as he further disengaged from school, he became more immersed in the relative "safety" of video games. At this stage, there was a decline in parental supervision and a reportedly "neglectful home environment" where being out late at night consuming alcohol and accessing explicitly violent and sexual content in movies and online was tolerated. He increasingly engaged with violent fantasies and physical violence directed towards his peers in response to bullying.

5.5 Experiencing Detention Education

As the special education teacher at the detention centre Ryan was assigned to my care on his arrival at the facility immediately after his arrest. He was clearly overwhelmed by his situation, was sullen, offhand, and full of teenage bravado. Concerningly, he was assessed as being both highly depressed and suicidal by the attending psychologist. As the teacher assigned to assess his educational needs and to develop a strategy for successful school engagement, I spent a considerable amount of one-on-one time with him, trying to develop a positive relationship and a shared understanding of both the expectations of the school and the support he would receive.

Psychometric testing provided to the school by the psychologist indicated Ryan had significant cognitive and educational deficits, with his overall intellectual ability assessed as being in the lower extreme range of functioning (0.4 percentile). Likewise, his verbal ability was assessed as being in the lower extreme/ below average range (second percentile). Although the results did not differ significantly, reading and numeracy were retested using school-based tests that allowed his skills to be placed on a learning continuum. Reading accuracy and reading comprehension, along with

his spelling ability, were in the range of a seven -to eight-year-old child. Numeracy testing indicated that he was working at a Year 2 level with simple calculation skills and some understanding of basic measurement. He was not able to read analogue time or use number skills to solve word problems.

These results suggested that he would be unable to access the classroom work within the school, so he was allocated to my special needs group where the focus was on acquisition of basic skills. However, he was unwilling to participate (later disclosing he did not want the others to laugh at him) and quickly enacted his well-practised behaviours in the hope that he would be removed from class and sent back to his room for the day.

Ryan was the most high-profile detainee in the centre. He was also younger than the rest of the cohort having been separated from his co-accused and housed with the older detainees. Agencies were nervous and in the early days of his incarceration, daily reports on his behaviour, well-being and progress were being requested by the courts, government agencies and departments. This was not only a testing period for Ryan but also for me as his teacher due to the scrutiny my teaching practice was under.

The security directed protocols for non-compliance in school included removal from the class, thereby giving Ryan the option of using poor behaviour to avoid engaging with his schoolwork. In consultation with the security manager, I decided against using that sanction with Ryan unless it became dangerous. Ryan was informed that he would be remaining in the class for the duration of the lesson and if a time out was required it would be done in class with a security officer sitting with him. Ryan tried all his well-rehearsed taunts, he sat under the tables, put his head on the table, pulled his sweater over his head, called me names, refused to participate, was disruptive and abusive. My response was always delivered calmly acknowledging his behaviour but reiterating that he was remaining in class e.g., “you’re welcome to stay under the table, but you aren’t leaving my class.” His inability to make me angry was perhaps his greatest frustration initially, but he persisted.

After several weeks reinforcing that leaving was not an option but not making any significant progress with him, I changed tack. Prearranging with security for Ryan to be sent back to his cell on the first refusal, and in line with centre protocols, his room was cleared of comfort items, including his mattress, his access to television and radio for the duration of the school day. As Ryan’s predictably poor behaviours began, I feigned defeat, told him that he had won, that I could not take it anymore so he could go back to his cell. He delighted in telling me that he knew he could beat me and wear me down. It was then I informed him that his cell would be cleared. He scoffed telling me that teachers could not apply penalties outside the school and was visibly surprised when I responded with “that’s funny because I’ve already done it. Enjoy your day.”

During the interview Ryan laughed about this incident recalling his surprise that he had not been able to “crack me” and the impact that had.

> I thought, oh, this fucking woman. I'm like, but, you fuckin beat me down. I said I'm going to be your hardest student to fuckin’ crack and you went, no you’re not.

The following morning, I went to Ryan’s cell and invited him back to school. He opted for a second day away. Comfort items were once again removed, and he once again spent the day in his cell. On the third day he asked if he could return to school, reluctantly declaring me the winner. Having established the dynamics of the relationship, I negotiated with him explaining that I wanted him there, wanted him to feel supported, acknowledging that I also understood it was difficult.

Guided by a trauma informed understanding of empowering students to actively participate in the agreements around their learning, the “if you do this for me, I will do this for you” approach was used. We agreed that he would engage with ten minutes of schoolwork and then he would be able to watch a video of his favourite comedian for the rest of the lesson. I agreed that he would be given activities that were within his capabilities and that assistance was available as he required.

Ryan recalled his first few weeks:

> In the first few weeks I just had my head on the table. I think I had you like three times a day. I thought, this is bullshit! I can’t even go in any other class. But yeah, then you gave me stand-up comedy. You do 20 minutes of work and I’ll give you the rest of the time on comedy shows. I thought- No worries!

Ryan settled into this routine happily and did not resist or notice when the length of time for schoolwork was imperceptibly increased. As he began feeling successful his capacity to stay on task increased and over a ten-week period his on-task time increased to the majority of the lesson time. He would occasionally ask for video time on days of high anxiety but, in general, he engaged well, albeit separately from the other students. Familiarity and confidence through success and recognition eventually saw Ryan request to participate in the group activities and to no longer work alone. This was a milestone for him and the beginning of his real engagement with learning.

Ryan, remembering the moment said:

> I remember thinking I'm going to be your hardest student to fucking crack. But then I tried and I thought, oh, I got through it and so I kept trying. I struggled through it and then I kept trying. Then I noticed that I’d done it (the schoolwork). I went ahhh, this fucking woman- you fucking beat me at my own game. And then I remember telling you like I don’t need this (video) anymore; can I join the regular class?

Notably, providing an acceptable and accessible option to escape a demanding task minimised the need for Ryan to invoke his negative behaviours to avoid it. Ensuring the tasks were within his capacity increased his sense of success and reduced his fear of failure and ridicule. Providing an expectation of engagement, even though initially it was small, reduced the anxiety associated with learning. This process took about ten weeks, from sitting under the table to asking

to participate in lessons, a significant change for Ryan. Once these positive behaviours were in place, I was then able to extend him into tasks that were more challenging, especially reading.

His comments about feeling successful provide insight into the fundamental shift occurring in his relationship with education, and the effect of positive recognition.

> Yeah. Well I felt like I could, when I hadn't before - because everyone was behind me, staff, teachers, you, fucking everyone was like, well, you can do it, and then I started getting more access (to practical lessons and workshops) - I was in spelling and reading for so long, and then when I started getting the hang of that and fucking reading and all, then youse gave me other stuff to do like cooking and metal work and woodwork, and I was good at that. I thought fuck, I wasn't worrying, and I was learning. I was actually happy that I was doing shit. It was fucking great; I wasn't struggling as much.

5.6 Experiencing Success

Success saw Ryan become more willing to take risks with his learning and to engage with more challenging tasks such as reading. Together we decided that his priority would be to work towards becoming an independent reader (reading age 11 years). A reading program based on synthetic phonics and levelled readers working with a qualified and skilled reading coach daily saw him increase his reading age by six years during his four years at the facility, exiting with a reading age of 13.5 - 14.0 years. This allowed him to work at a similar level to most average high school students, have sufficient skills to participate in TAFE courses and to be on par with the adult prison population.

As if to underscore his newfound literacy skills Ryan began a very public and ambitious project of writing a novel, see Figure 10 below, a story of a teenage gang member living in Detroit. The main character was loosely disguised as himself, and through this character (a literary avatar) he explored feelings, reactions, and empathy. He was inordinately proud of himself, even referring to himself as an author. When complete, he asked that I print it and send copies to his parents. It appeared that even with successes in his practical classes and gaining a TAFE certificate in hospitality, it was his success in literacy that gave him the greatest sense of achievement. A small excerpt below (Figure 9) demonstrating his improved literacy skills.

In Johann von Goethe's *The Sorrows of Young Werther*, the protagonist's deep sense of 'Sehnsucht' drives much of his emotional journey and shapes his thoughts and actions. This concept encapsulates a profound yearning for something unattainable, often characterised by a mix of joy and sorrow. As a classic *Bildungsroman*, the novel also follows the protagonist's emotional and psychological development illustrating how his yearning contributes to his personal growth and fate (Goethe, 1787).

Similarly, Ryan, growing up in gaol as young teenager, uses his newfound writing skills as a therapeutic outlet to explore his own longings. His Sehnsucht encompasses a desire for family,

freedom, happiness, and peace after his crime. Ryan explores these intense emotions in his writing by creating a literary ‘avatar’ of himself mirrors Goethe’s method of using a character to express deep emotional states. Writing allowed Ryan to externalise his thoughts and emotions, giving voice to his experiences of isolation and yearning for connection. Through writing he attempts to navigate his inner conflicts and finds a constructive way to engage with these intense emotions, thus illustrating how the act of writing can in itself be transformative. An excerpt from his story is shown in Figure 9 below with additional material located in Appendix 2

She was incredibly stunning with long hair the colour of onyx. Her skin was golden like the sun. She was quite tall, about 6 feet, but very slender. The face was that of classic beauty that seemed to be just like her personality. And then noticed her eyes, they were as blue as the ocean. I tried to speak, but just stumbled over my words. I began to think, how am I going to do this? That's when she casually asked me if I was having a good night. Her words were like music to my ears.

Figure 9: Excerpt from Ryan’s novella age 16

Indicative of his progress is Figure 10 below that shows his writing ability at age 14 via a spelling test. He was unable to correctly spell words such as bed *(bad),* time *(tiem),* week *(went),* sooner *(sooier),* year *(yere)* and dream *(dreem)* scoring 22 out of 100. The image has been redacted to protect Ryan’s identity.

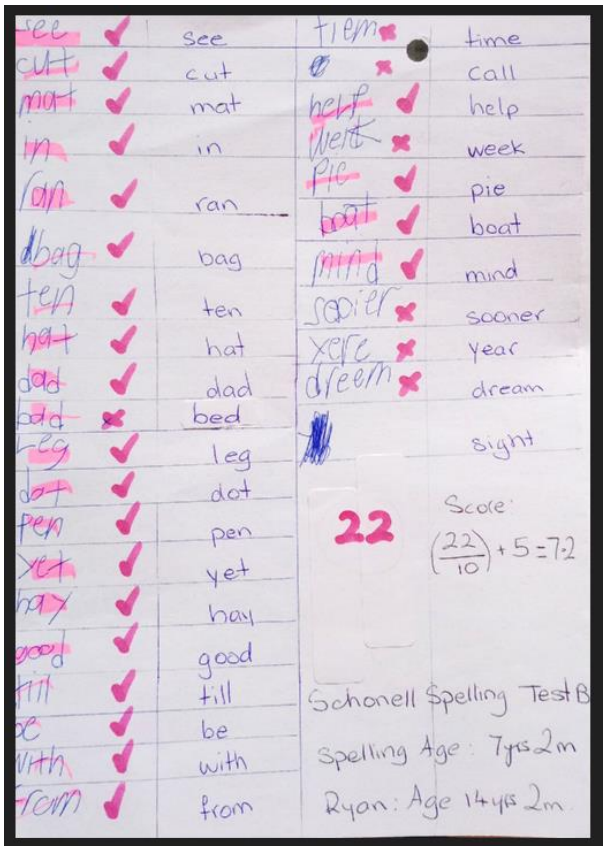

Figure 10: Spelling sample age 14

Interestingly, a second IQ assessment at age 18 indicated an overall increase in Ryan's IQ score, taking him from the first to the fifth percentile and out of the intellectual disability range. While IQ is not fixed, this change was considered significant and attributed largely to his reading improvement. Reading increases both crystalised intelligence, vocabulary and general knowledge, and fluid intelligence, the ability to solve problems and detect patterns, think abstractly, and make connections (Sun et al., 2024).

As discussed previously, reading enhances empathy by exposing individuals to diverse perspectives and emotions. Non-fiction can give readers insight into others' struggles, fostering cognitive empathy. Emotional engagement with narratives cultivates affective empathy, while the motivation to take action demonstrates compassionate empathy (Djikic et al.,2013). Reading literary fiction promotes empathy by transporting readers into the emotional landscapes of fictional characters, facilitating a deeper understanding of human emotions (Djikic et al.,2013).

The contribution reading had for Ryan's improving levels of empathy was noted in a transition report prepared for his transfer to the adult prison system which noted that Ryan had commenced reading for pleasure in his spare time. Importantly, this report connected his growing ability to read with his growing insight into the lives and experiences of other people and cultures, suggesting that it had assisted him to develop a degree of empathy for others.

5.7 Motivation

Most students who learn to read as adolescents follow a different trajectory to that characteristically seen in very young children, often making significant gains in a relatively short period. Typically, big gains are followed by a learning plateau, then again by another rapid growth period until the student encounters the next obstacle with this pattern repeating (Lovett et al., 2021). Ryan, like many students who have reached an adequate level of reading competence, lost motivation to continue instructional activities wanting to spend his time on practical subjects and workshops. There was, however, an unexpected resurgence in motivation and renewed interest in reading towards the end of his third year in detention. Recalling his enthusiasm, he shared his memories of it.

> Yeah, that motivation was funny. I was at the end of my ropes at that point. I was ready to say goodbye and well, that made me laugh- of all the things I didn't expect. I found out that one of the girls in juvie had a thing for me, and I thought, fucking bullshit!

This amusing, yet poignant anecdote underlines the significance that being able to read can hold. For those of us for whom reading is easy, it is all but impossible to understand the intensity of the emotions attached to reading. It requires enormous energy and resilience, akin to a non-mathematician trying to solve a mathematical theorem. There was nothing more difficult for Ryan than reading, it was his "Mt Everest." So, on hearing of this girl's interest, he, like most teenage

boys, chose to do the most impressive and courageous thing he could think to attract her… and he decided to read a book.

> And then I found out through staff that she really did (like me), and I thought, you know, I'll give it a crack at the book. I thought, fuck it, yeah, why not? I don't want to come off as a dumb fuck. So, I picked up the first *Game of Thrones* book, and I didn't tell anyone about it.

Ryan was able to read everyday texts (a functional reader) but still struggled with multisyllabic words and was not yet an independent reader. He explained:

> I sat there in my cell for two weeks, and I struggled through the first 200 pages. But I think the biggest success in that for me was when I figured out how to sound out the word translucent. I put it together. I'm like, that's translucent which means see-through, and I went… I just got that big word in the first three pages. I went, game on! And half of it was in Old English because they were speaking in medieval tongue and I got that, and I understood it too!
> "I understood the whole story and then I finished that and then I grabbed the second one and then I found you and said, I need to tell you something Rae, please sit down, you're probably going to have a fuckin heart attack. I just read Game of Thrones in two weeks."
>
> I didn't tell anyone about it, I did it by myself, I can read Game of Thrones and I'm on the second one now." And you looked at me with utter disbelief and you went, No way!
> Ryan goes on to describe how this success made him feel.
>
> I felt like I'd really done something. I thought, fuck, first book I've read is a fuckin absolute… it had 900 pages. But it was hard. It was a book that most high school kids struggle to read, let alone someone with learning disorders and bad mental health and I smashed it in two weeks. Two, two and a half weeks. It was a big achievement. It still feels like a big achievement all these years later, yeah, it was a massive achievement.

Expressing his internal dialogue:

> I've read other great books since then. I was impressed with myself. It was like, I can read now, I can fuckin read! I think I said to you, I don't need to be in reading classes anymore, but you made me keep going. But I'd be reading a book and I'd smash that. I wouldn't have to have help to sound out the words as much. It was a bit of a milestone for me. I felt happy I could read a book."
> I just thought, I can read! I said, now I don't have to do certain things. I still don't know how to spell. You put the words in front of me, I can sound it out but take the words away and I'm still sitting there looking at it like a fuckin idiot. I still struggle with it.
> I was quite happy with myself about being able to read… I did it and then I just thought to myself, yeah, I can read, cool hey! And I was hoping I would read many more books; I've probably read about 30 books now.
> It gives me an escape when there's nothing on television. I'll sit there and I'll just turn the telly off, and I'll sit there and read for three, four hours.
> Yeah, I could read for three to four hours, it's easy! And I'm reading and reading at the moment.

The enduring impact of this moment is evidenced in the palpable sense of the excitement in Ryan's description, his tone revealing his pride in, and the significance of reading this book, along with his lingering sense of disbelief that he actually did it. It was a pivotal moment that he described as "intense." The self-validation that resulted from acknowledging the magnitude of his accomplishment was particularly important in helping him to no longer consider himself as a "retard" (his terminology) after hearing his IQ described as being in the retarded range during the initial court case.

Ryan's narrative reveals the transformative power of success, in this case reading. Despite

his ongoing struggles with spelling, reading has become a source of joy and empowerment, allowing him to immerse himself in other worlds for hours on end. His determination to continue reading, even in the face of difficulties, speaks to the long-lasting impact that literacy has had on his life.

The importance of this significant gain in reading skills was reiterated in a summary report prepared for Ryan's transition to the adult correctional system. Exit testing by a psychologist indicated that he was no longer operating in the extremely low/borderline range of intelligence (0.4 percentile) and his overall IQ had risen to the fifth percentile taking him out of the lowest range.

Similarly, his verbal comprehension had risen from the second percentile to an age-appropriate level on par with other 18-year-olds. Reports collated by his case manager noted that his involvement with the detention school had been highly beneficial as demonstrated by Ryan's increased confidence in literacy, increased motivation and a desire to become involved in a useful vocation in the future. It also notes that his self- concept had also noticeably improved as a result of his educational success.

Further comments noted the associated changes (listed below) that were attributed to his improved literacy:

- Reading for pleasure in his spare time
- Participating in writing a fictional book
- Developing more confidence and aptitude in relation to his use and comprehension of language
- Making substantial progress in other areas of education
- Developing an understanding of and empathy towards others through gaining insight into the lives and experiences of other people and cultures through reading

5.8 Empathy

For Ryan, the cultivation of empathy was one of the most significant changes brought about by learning to read, underscoring their connection. His developing empathy and enhanced social competence having contributed to his personal growth. His reflections highlight how reading helped him develop empathy and transform his understanding of others and himself. As Ryan phrases it, (and gives us the title for this thesis): "Reading, it made me human again, because before (the attack), I wasn't really."

His attribution of his humanity to reading and his personal insight emphasises the profound effect that engaging with literature had on his emotional and moral growth. This transformation is very significant when considered in relation to the brutality of his crime.

Ryan's early lack of empathy is illustrated by both his indifference to stories, his initial inability to connect with them on an emotional level, and his inability to understand why other students were moved by sad stories. He recalled a story from primary school, Lachenmeyer's *Broken Beaks*, a story of friendship between an injured sparrow and a homeless man, commenting that he remembers it because he could not understand why the other children were so upset.

> When I look back, it was a beautiful story, but when I was a kid, I couldn't give two shits...I couldn't show empathy for it, but now if I read the same book, I could get it," he reflects.

This lack of connection and empathy as a child contrasts sharply with his current ability to engage emotionally with stories and characters. Ryan's experience with the *Game of Thrones* series illustrates this shift:

> The main character was, like he was the epitome… of a young, angry me... I loved it, I thought they were great books.

Ryan saw himself in and related to the characters, facilitating a deeper understanding of his own emotions and actions. His description of his emotional responses to these stories shows his growing empathy and compassion:

> Yeah, I cry when I read... I've read a couple of books where there's been some sad chapters and it's broken me. I've sat there and cried.

This emotional engagement extends to real-life relationships, where he expresses increased empathy and support for loved ones:

> Yeah, I'm a lot more empathetic towards people, especially people I love... If they're having a bad day, I'll sit there and I'll make sure they're all right.

Ryan's ability to empathise with others marks a significant change in his personal development, as he acknowledges that his increased empathy has helped him reframe his actions to better understand the consequences of his crime. Despite this, he remains troubled by the discomfort that comes with being able to experience the pain of others.

> Yeah, like it's 50/50. I don't like having these negative feelings that come with it. I guess it was a kind of helpful thing when I couldn't read, then I could shut things off, but now (that I can read and feel things) it's a lot more harder, but I think that's the part of becoming human again, because for a long time, I wasn't, I was very shut off.

Ryan commented that he knew he had been "hard to reach" noting that the positive relationships he had built at school with teachers, through experiencing success, had given him the safety to allow himself to feel things again.

> Yeah, you definitely helped. You never gave up on me even when I was fuckin weeping or I'm just, let me die. Yeah, youse didn't let me.

Commenting on reading the Harry Potter books, he compared the experience of reading them

to the experience of watching the movies.

> I've read all of them, apart from the first one. I haven't found that one in gaol yet, but I really enjoyed them. They made me cry. I fuckin' cried hard in them. Dobby (the house elf) dying, that broke me. It broke me but didn't make me cry (in the movie) but in the book it was sad because Dobby was more a central character. Yeah. And then you … learn more about the Weasley Family, the mother of the Weasleys, you see her break. And then when you find out that one of the twins gets killed and it shows the emotion of that, and you're like, all right, it's a bit more detailed in this. Yeah, there's a lot more stuff in it, I was actually invested in characters.

The difference in generating empathy between books and movies is primarily due to the level of cognitive engagement and regulation required in the load directed towards executive functioning. Watching a movie offloads a number of the demands on executive function via the sensory-rich and guided storytelling format. Reading, however, demands more from executive functions, engaging cognitive processes more intensively to decode, comprehend, and interpret the text (Oatley, 2016). Executive function plays a crucial role in several ways. Firstly, reading requires sustained attention over extended periods, as the reader must focus on the text, avoid distractions, and maintain concentration to follow the narrative (Diamond, 2013). Secondly, it requires working memory so that the reader actively holds and manipulates information, remembering previous parts of the story while integrating new details to understand the plot and character development (Baddeley, 2003). The reader must also inhibit unrelated thoughts and external distractions to stay engaged with the text (Miyake et al., 2000) and finally, it requires cognitive flexibility for the reader to shift perspectives, infer meanings, and connect different parts of the story, especially with complex narratives or non-linear plots (Cartwright, 2012).

5.9 Making Sense of it All

During our interview, Ryan told me that he had recently been given a provisional diagnosis of autism spectrum disorder (ASD), adding that his father had previously been diagnosed with Asperger's. He referred to his father's "black and white thinking" and inability to see things from any other perspective, concluding that this may have played some part in his reactiveness as a child, recounting his father's encouragement to retaliate when he was bullied. Asked if the diagnosis or label concerned him, he told me he 'found it helpful and was sort of excited about it.'

Explaining further, he said*:*

> Yeah. Well, Einstein, fuckin' and all them, they were all (autistic). Yeah, but it helps. It helps to understand what the fuck's been going on.

Ryan's experiences provide a compelling testimony of the transformative power of reading and its role in developing his empathy. His commentary underscores the benefits of literacy skills in fostering social and emotional growth, particularly with at-risk youth. His narrative aligns well with previous research, showing that reading and engaging with books has played a crucial role in developing his empathy, enhancing his social competence, and allowing him to reflect on the

consequences of his crime, reaffirming the broader benefits that reading contributes to rehabilitation.

5.10 Chapter Summary

Ryan's account of his experience of school and education before and after the crime, told through a retrospective lens during the interview. It touches on early school experiences, early detention education experiences, motivation and success and developing a sense of understanding about how to move forward in his life. His narrative is reflective and compares his sense of self before and after he learned to read. In this reflection, it is his growing experience of empathy that is singled out as the significant change associated with his literacy underscored by the words that gave the thesis its name… "reading made me human again".

CHAPTER 6

STRUGGLING TOGETHER

"The true measure of our character is how we treat the poor, the disfavoured, the accused, the incarcerated and the condemned." Bryan Stevenson *Just Mercy* (2014)

6.1 Introduction

The preceding quotation introduces the teacher's perspective, emphasising the difficulties and responsibilities of educators working with the most marginalised and vulnerable students. The chapter explores how the teacher's recognition of Ryan's potential and struggles played a crucial role in his journey. By providing support and understanding, the teacher exemplifies the benefits of compassionate and inclusive educational practices that promote personal growth and empowerment.

This autoethnographic chapter is included to contextualise the multiple layers of difficulties associated with supporting adolescent non-readers both generally and as it applied to Ryan. It is also illustrative of the broader implications of how a lack of professional expertise in this area across the education system compounds the plight of students like Ryan, whether they be in detention facilities or in schools. The lack of teacher expertise in this area is a significant contributor to the marginalisation of students like Ryan which further damages self-worth and diminishes access to the appropriate curriculum, with early disengagement the most likely result.

Teachers working in this niche area of education, like their students, are also marginalised and rarely recognised for the particular skills or the work that is required of them to be successful in this unique environment. A lack of understanding and recognition of the inherent challenges of this setting by the department (Education) contributes to a high turnover of staff who struggle with their blanket policies. The loss of expertise and corporate knowledge therefore has a marginalising effect on teachers and has an impact on the delivery of high-quality educational opportunities for detainees.

Adolescence is a critical period for the development of self-concept and identity, which are central to an individual's capacity for general adjustment and quality of life (Alsaker & Kroger, 2007). The inability to read significantly affects how these students perceive themselves in comparison to their peers. Early reading instruction, programs, and resources are designed around the developmental needs of young children and are intended to be delivered sequentially, over an extended period, with multiple opportunities for reinforcement and consolidation expected. Reading programs for adolescents assume that students have mastered decoding skills and focus on improving higher level literacy skills that support their understanding of narrative and content-area texts (Marchand-Martella et al., 2013). See figure 11 below.

Figure removed due to copyright restriction

Figure 11: Five areas of effective adolescent literacy programs (Marchand-Martella et al., 2013)

However, as in Ryan's case, many juvenile detainees that I worked with had reading levels well below their same aged peers and closer to that of an eight-year-old. The omission of basic decoding skills instruction fails to acknowledge the need for the priority of this aspect of instruction for adolescent students. The lack of expertise in adapting early instructional materials to this older cohort, in my experience, has seen the students with the greatest difficulties further pushed to the periphery and rather than receive expert support they are relegated to computer-based support or instructed by a teaching aide using resources and programs designed for very young children, neither of which are successful, nor suitable in the context of adolescents.

6.2 Detention-School Teaching

Teaching in a detention facility is both challenging and demanding, frequently complicated by extreme behaviours, high population turnovers and security-based limitations (Reed, 2017). It challenges the often-heard calls for punitive responses to juvenile crime and requires a humanistic perspective (Devineau, 2010) that believes offenders are both capable of being educated and deserving of its benefits, especially those benefits that come from learning to read. Although written in 1999, the following description remains an accurate representation of the difficulties faced by teachers and highlights an additional unseen layer of disadvantage faced by juvenile offenders.

> Teachers… are seldom prepared for what awaits them... Students come and go …Classes are rarely uniform in either age, year level, academic competency, or behavior. Teachers interact with… counselors, care staff, court workers, probation officers, and medical personnel. They often have to integrate… treatment plan[s] and institutional discipline system into their classroom conduct. Children … are plagued by a host of problems and worries, which show up as difficult, sometimes violent behavior in the classroom" (Brooks & White, 1999, p. Intro-2)

In Australia, detention-school teachers have no additional training, nor do they receive additional remuneration for working 'behind bars.' Specialist training and recognition for their unique skill set would ultimately benefit students. It is hoped that this thesis might illuminate their work and its importance in the rehabilitation process.

Most people's understanding of schooling, i.e. what teachers do and what students are expected to be able to do, will come from their own (usually mainstream) experience, which will

influence the way in which this discussion is interpreted. This section provides some insight into what is for most an unfamiliar, and very different context in which to teach and in which students might learn. This hopefully will disrupt, at least to some extent, those preconceptions.

Teaching is challenging and teaching middle school boys is usually seen as getting the ‘short straw’. Teaching teenage boys in juvenile detention raises the degree of difficulty exponentially and introduces complications outside the control of the teacher. And while some will say that the presence of security officers supports compliance, learning requires far more than external enforcement. I have faced accusations of teaching from a deficit perspective because I have highlighted the significant challenges faced by some detention students. However, acknowledging these challenges is not about assigning blame; it is about establishing a realistic starting point for progress. Ryan exemplifies my belief that, with the appropriate support and time, he could be taught, and he could learn.

Unlike most mainstream students, many detention students are operating seven to ten years behind their same age peers. Even as a special education teacher, I found this confronting and difficult to grasp the degree of deficit these students had. It took me several weeks, for example, to realise that the reason one of my students refused to type was that he only recognised lowercase letters and was not familiar with the uppercase letters typically used on keyboards. He had spent nearly four years in detention on multiple short sentences, he had never attended the school in which he was enrolled and was considered to be a behavioural challenge. At no time had his complete illiteracy been assessed or addressed.

The significance of these factors is critical to understanding both the profound challenge of finding a way to support these students and the importance of every successful adaptation, process or activity that proves to be successful and thereby reduces the degree of marginalisation the students face. It also underscores that even the most challenging of students can be successful, as it was with Ryan. Some of the most exciting and memorable moments in my teaching career have been witnessing the joy that struggling readers show when finally, it starts to make sense. I use the word transformational judiciously, however, when a student finally succeeds at something they have feared and thought impossible, they are quite literally, transformed.

Teaching is my second career, but unlike most teachers it has been mainly in non-mainstream settings. It would not be unreasonable to say that for most students in detention mainstream education has already failed them, so replicating more of the same would be, in itself, pointless. For these students to be successful what is offered to them must be different. These differences underpin how and why Ryan eventually engaged with both learning to read and education more generally.

Locally, the Department for Education operates a state-funded school within detention facilities

it neither owns nor manages, effectively making the school a service provider to another department. Reflecting on the lack of recognition given to the importance of education in rehabilitation, the differences in philosophies guiding these organisations created conflict. While access to education is seen as a basic human right by the United Nations, and teachers see the young people as students, the facility sees offenders, prioritising their detention. Security overrides all other considerations, impacting all aspects of education delivery (Wright, 2022). Students are placed in classes based on security and legal issues, then on personal 'behavioural/ security level', and lastly on educational needs, thereby reducing the opportunity for students to be aligned with the appropriate teacher or curriculum offerings.

I was constantly frustrated by the lack of autonomy and imbalance between the needs of the facility and the needs of the school with educational priorities always subjugated to security needs. Despite the juvenile justice system being predicated on the notion of rehabilitation, the primary role of the facility was to keep the students from escaping. The role of teachers was effectively considered as babysitting or entertaining the students rather than being seen as providing a valuable contribution to the rehabilitation and long-term life outcomes of the students (a critical issue for this research). Security, legal issues, professional visitors, cultural, mental health, and rehabilitation programs, along with withdrawal symptoms, erratic behaviours and interrupted attendance, all compromised student learning (Wright, 2022).

While the reader might be imagining schoolboys, the reality is very different. I stress this point deliberately so that when considering what might appear as relatively minor improvements might be better appreciated for their real significance. Many of these students had been truant for years, were homeless, some had children of their own, others were associated with outlawed motorcycle gangs, many were long-term drug users of cannabis, methamphetamines (ice) cigarettes and alcohol, and were experiencing withdrawal symptoms. I recall multiple students experiencing psychotic episodes with auditory hallucinations during lesson time and having to compete with the "other voices" for their attention. The facility's expectation of attending school often triggered major behavioural issues for students with poor literacy who feared being exposed or humiliated.

Whilst mandated to ensure the students were being prepared for the outside world, access to resources and technology was limited and internet access was heavily restricted. Pen and paper were the norm and for those many students with learning difficulties, limiting their access to assistive technologies further inhibited their potential for learning.

Students might be in detention for a few hours, days, or weeks with information about the length of their stay determined by the availability of court dates, lawyers, and family circumstances. Fifteen minutes before the students arrived at school I would be notified of the names of the students in my class, and in that time, I was expected to have prepared a meaningful, appropriately targeted and engaging lesson that met the needs of these, often unknown students. Guilt ridden,

but out of necessity, students were sometimes given “busy work” rather than rigorous educational experiences. And while this was in part unavoidable, it concerned me that many of our “frequent flyers,” our students with high rates of recidivism, were not having their underlying needs for intensive literacy and numeracy support addressed.

Teaching these students to read became my priority and being blissfully ignorant of my own ignorance (Dunning, 2011), I assumed that it could not be too difficult, and enthusiastically set out to find a way to teach them to read. Not unsurprisingly, I was quickly overwhelmed by the sense of isolation and frustration at the lack of information to support me. While resources for supporting young children were abundant, there was scant information on adolescent literacy and adapting early learning methods for older students. My work in trying to address this gap led to Ryan being assigned to me as a student several years later. Starting from a very low level and having spent considerable time incarcerated, teaching him to read became an ideal opportunity to trial a modified instructional approach."

My long experience as a health care professional proved to be an advantage as I was not limited by ineffective teaching practices and brought to the problem a perspective more closely aligned to the more familiar approaches used in hospital emergency departments. I finally defaulted to implementing a triage system that allowed me to screen quickly and prioritise students based on their needs and the urgency of those needs.

These processes have proven to be successful in a variety of school settings outside juvenile detention. They are outlined with additional resources and included as Appendix 1. The information may be of value to others still struggling with implementing effective processes to identify and support older struggling readers.

6.3 Teaching Ryan

I was often asked by other teachers “How do you work with those kids?” but when it came to teaching Ryan, the question was simply, “how can you even bear to look at him?” The brutality of his crime shocked experienced detention staff and other detainees alike. Recognised and despised for his crime he was marginalised by both detainees and staff (with some experienced staff refusing to work with him) he quickly adopted the label of being violent as his persona, believing it gave him both status and a degree of protection.

Ryan was the biggest challenge I faced as a teacher. He was an extremely high-profile detainee and as the special education teacher he was assigned to me. The high level of interest in his case by multiple agencies resulted in a high level of scrutiny of my teaching, and for the first few weeks I was providing detailed daily reports of his interactions and behaviour. I found this scrutiny uncomfortable as I tried to balance what I felt was appropriate for Ryan with the

instructions coming from the department made by managers who had neither worked in the facility nor met Ryan. The Education Department seemed overly keen to be visible in supporting Ryan and initially required me to document everything I did and most of what Ryan said. This effort to be visible disappeared quite quickly once his case went to court, effectively leaving me to navigate how best to teach Ryan alone.

Juvenile rehabilitation is primarily seen as the domain of psychologists and social workers, and focusses on the psychological well-being, social reintegration, and behavioural correction to work towards a reduction in recidivism. This focus minimises the role of education and the contributions of teachers, who are not always perceived as part of the rehabilitation process. This section seeks to address this disparity by advocating for a more central role for education within the rehabilitation framework.

Given the magnitude of Ryan's learning difficulties, his trauma and unpredictable behaviours, his immaturity and mental health issues, he presented as a significant challenge for me and for the other professionals involved in his care. Teachers interact with juvenile detainees far more frequently than their counterparts in psychology and social work, and they contribute to and reinforce the work of these professionals by providing real-time support and feedback to practise social and behavioural strategies, self-control and problem solving. For example, I spent approximately 22.5 hours per week with Ryan and beyond curriculum, provided continuous engagement and reinforcement of social and behavioural expectations, praise, recognition, feedback, and opportunities to interact appropriately with others. In contrast, psychologists and social workers typically engaged with him for only one or two sessions per week.

Initially, Ryan had limited concentration, was easily distracted, had poor fine motor skills making it difficult for him to use pencils and pens, and routinely used "out-of-seat" behaviours, for example, getting up from his desk multiple times to put rubbish in a bin, or to retrieve a dropped pencil. These behaviours are common in students with ADHD and autism and serve functional purposes, including task avoidance, sensory stimulation, and social escape (Downing & Mitchem, 2005). Teachers routinely use a variety of strategies to decrease these unwanted behaviours. After observing Ryan for several days, I established that his out-of-seat behaviours were triggered by tasks that required reading and that they were being used in order to avoid these tasks.

As previously mentioned in Chapter 5, I had devised a program to modify these behaviours, importantly, recognising that as his goal was avoidance, removing him from class would be rewarding and reinforcing these behaviours as successful strategies. Initially, however, this was met with opposition from security staff whose interpretation of his behaviour was disobedience. I was admonished for failing to adhere to their behaviour code by not sending him to the timeout cell and insisted that I should do so. This then required the intervention of senior management with

whom I had discussed the process, in order to proceed with my program. While this response is understandable in a detention setting and acknowledging the limitations of the training provided to security staff, the inherent assumption that an experienced teacher did not know what they were doing rather than assuming that as an experienced teacher this was a thoughtful and deliberate response, exemplifies the hierarchical nature of the detention setting and the perception that the work teachers do is akin to babysitting. There is a lack of respect for the professional work of teachers that persists through education being placed on the periphery of the rehabilitation process.

Teachers are qualified and registered professionals who adhere to professional standards and ongoing professional education. They are, by definition, specialists in educating and working with young people. They have insights into their students' cognitive abilities, socialisation skills, problem solving abilities, anger management triggers, concentration and focus capacities, receptive and expressive language skills, and personalities. Their daily interactions with students foster an environment where socialisation and behavioural expectations are supported and reinforced, while their consistent presence allows for the real-time implementation of the therapeutic and behavioural interventions as directed by psychologists and social workers in conjunction with the educational and curriculum-based work that they provide.

Ryan's successful reading journey, for example, comes as a result of the collective experience I had gained from working with hundreds of detained students. Beginning at the lowest reading level, having complex learning challenges, and navigating serious behavioural issues, Ryan's success is illustrative of what can be achieved in detention education settings when the appropriate learning interventions are provided. With over a decade of teaching experience in the unique environment of a juvenile detention facility and having worked with over a thousand individual students, there are lessons to be shared with others who work with these students in their professional capacities.

My success was Ryan's success, and, as we ventured forward together it became an extraordinary learning experience for us both. The extensive daily contact we shared slowly but surely built into a functional and successful teacher-student relationship and I eventually became one of Ryan's few trusted adults, as evidenced by his referencing of me as *Aunty*, and his insistence on introducing himself to new detainees as my 'nephew.' However, with consistent, predictable routines and expectations, success-based learning, good humour, and firm boundaries Ryan thrived, perhaps for the first time in his life.

Whilst clearly the therapies and counselling he received contributed significantly to his improvement, it is still surprising that the 22 hours a week spent with teachers was largely considered inconsequential to his progress. By repositioning education more centrally within the

rehabilitation framework, the unique expertise of teachers could be better utilised to reinforce and enhance therapeutic outcomes.

For example, I witnessed numerous occasions where programs delivered by therapists were centred on PowerPoint presentations and accompanied by printed handouts to groups of students who were unable to read. I watched unsuccessful attempts to involve students with language and communication deficits and/ or poor executive functioning, in discussions about abstract concepts such as resilience, responsibility and accountability, knowing full well that these students had neither the vocabulary nor capacity to participate at that level. I recall a student with a severe language disorder following a meeting with his social worker to discuss his accommodation options after release asking me what *accommodation* meant. This information was not withheld from the therapists, rather the therapists simply did not think to consult with education staff.

As a special education teacher, differentiating material to improve accessibility and cater to the developmental and specific learning needs of students is part of my skill set, and while visiting therapists were aware that many students had learning difficulties, they were ill-equipped to adapt their programs sufficiently to make them accessible, tending to overestimate the capacity of the students, particularly their oral language capacity. While I attended many of these programs and therapy sessions, my role was limited to “crowd control” rather than using my skills to support them to modify their programs to better meet the needs of the students. A missed opportunity for all when by leveraging the strengths and skill sets of teachers the effectiveness of their rehabilitation programs could be greatly enhanced.

6.4 Chapter Summary

This chapter outlines some aspects of teaching in a detention facility and how the dominant perception of rehabilitation, measured by a reduction in recidivism, places education on its periphery. Despite teachers spending more time with detainees than other professionals, their contribution to rehabilitation is largely unacknowledged. This lack of recognition jeopardises therapeutic programs that might benefit from teacher support to ensure materials were accessible to students with learning difficulties.

CHAPTER 7

Reading Made Me Human Again

"I felt a great emptiness inside, as if I had been searching for some glimpse, not outside but within myself."
Schlink, B. *The Reader* (1997)

7.1 Introduction to Findings

This quotation from Bernard Schlink's novel *The Reader* (1997) resonates deeply with Ryan's journey as portrayed in this chapter. Through reading Ryan found a path to reconnect with his humanity, echoing Schlink's protagonist who after learning to read in prison was able to confront her past actions and ultimately make sense of crime and her life. This chapter explores the pivotal role literacy played in Ryan's development of self-worth, recognition, and personal growth and underscores the profound impact that learning to read had for him and highlights the intrinsic connection between literacy and humanisation.

Understanding how learning to read influenced Ryan's development and identity, particularly considering his experiences of marginalisation and exclusion, Ryan's narrative highlighted the crucial role it played in gaining recognition, success, acceptance, self-worth, and in his intellectual and moral growth. The key findings are listed in 7.2 below and are followed by the discussion that aims to interpret and contextualise these findings, compare them to the existing literature by highlighting similarities and differences, explain these, and outline the practical and policy implications that intensive reading support within juvenile rehabilitation had for Ryan.

The aims were to:

1a: To explore the participant's perception of the transformative power of learning to read.
1b. To explore how marginalisation through illiteracy is interconnected with school failure and delinquency
2: To consider how Ryan's narrative contributes to a nuanced understanding of juvenile offender rehabilitation, positioning reading intervention as a central component within the rehabilitation process.

These have been interrogated through the following research question:

1. How has learning to read as a teenager influenced a juvenile offender's perception of himself?

7.2 Key Findings

The four main themes that emerged from the data for Ryan, were that learning to read:

7.2.1 Reduced his sense of marginalisation - Increased his sense of belonging
7.2.2 Improved his self-esteem and self-concept

7.2.3 Improved his cognitive function

7.2.4 Increased his capacity for empathy and positive social interactions

These findings relate to Ryan's story and are not intended to be generalised. Findings 7.2a and 7.2b, were broadly consistent with observations made throughout my teaching career and with the expected impact that reading might have to an individual. However, cognitive improvement (Finding 7.2c) as an increased measure of IQ, and increased levels of empathy (Finding 7.2d) were both unexpected positive findings.

7.2.1 Reduction in Marginalisation and Increased Sense of Belonging

Ryan's narrative highlighted the deeply destructive power of marginalisation in his early life and the importance of being accepted and recognised by both his peers and his teachers. His evolution from an outsider to a respected and integrated member of his community (albeit within the confines of prison) was evident by the significance he placed on both the exclusion and his newfound experience of inclusion. Ryan's improved reading skills and his growing self-esteem /change in self-perception increased his sense of belonging and social inclusion. He began to connect with his peers and for the first time, developed a friendship group, which reduced his feelings of isolation.

Ryan described his sense of isolation from his peers before learning to read:

> I wasn't like other kids then, I knew it. I knew I was different…Out in the schoolyard, I struggled man. I just failed. I was always being bullied. I resented the fact that I was bullied, that I was targeted. I was dealing with bullies and fuckin not fitting in anywhere and I was like, I don't give a fuck about this. I just hated school.

Ryan also described his sense of being marginalised by teachers:

> In Year 1 I couldn't do the classes where we'd try to read or do 15 minutes of silent reading. I couldn't do it, so I'd just sit there and play with a figurine I had. And they'd say well at least that's silent and left me alone.
>
> I was a pass-through kid; I was one of them kids who finishes at the end of the year and they put you up to the next grade so that he's not our problem. They said to me: Why do you bother showing up, you're wasting your time and ours. You should get a job and fuck off. We don't want you here, you don't want to be here… I was in year 8.

Ryan recalled his experience of acceptance and friendship as an adult:

> I'm bloody well-respected in here (gaol). Everyone knows me. Everyone goes like, oh, brother, come here, come play soccer, come here, I want to tell you something.

According to his exit report, based on his experiences of sustained academic and peer difficulties at school and in the community, Ryan had for a long time, believed himself to be "dumb." The report suggested that his behavioural difficulties had led to problematic relationships with teachers and frequently being punished or reprimanded leading Ryan to develop beliefs that he was unable to learn and that he was being 'picked on.' This in turn had resulted in increased

levels of anxiety and frustration around schoolwork and using behaviours such as avoiding school, avoiding schoolwork, and lashing out through aggression. However, it was noted that once Ryan learned to read, he had shown a significant increase in academic skill and confidence.

Ryan's transition from marginalisation to a sense of belonging highlights the transformative power that education and acceptance had for him. His story illustrates how improving academic skills can lead to enhanced self-esteem and social inclusion, ultimately reducing feelings of isolation and fostering positive relationships.

7.2.2 Improved Self-Esteem and Self-Concept

As Ryan's reading abilities improved, so too did his overall academic performance, interactions with peers and interactions with staff. Ryan spoke of feeling supported and having people believe in him, feeling proud of himself and wanting to extend himself. Progress reports noted that Ryan developed a broader range of positive and pro-social beliefs about himself and was able to challenge directly and indirectly many of his previous unhelpful views which were expanded through positive experiences and success in schooling, leisure activities, and social interactions. Over his juvenile incarceration, Ryan was seen to have made gradual, sustained changes in his beliefs about himself as exemplified by his response to his improved IQ results by saying, “so I’m not a retard then?”

Ryan described his time at school:

> People sometimes made fun of me saying you can’t read you fucking rah, rah, rah. But I’d say that won’t stop me from sticking 12 inches of steel into you, you fucking swine… I was incredibly unhappy. (Bad) Behaviour was pretty much a defence mechanism to avoid being bullied.

After learning to read Ryan described his experience of school within detention:

> Yeah, well, I feel like I could have… because everyone was behind me, staff, teachers, you, fuckin everyone was like, 'Well, you can do it.' and then when I started getting the hang of that, then youse gave me other stuff to do like cooking and metalwork and woodwork and I was good at that, and I wasn't worrying, I was actually happy I was doing shit, fuckin I wasn't struggling as much…I was impressed with myself. It was like, I can read now, I can fuckin’ read! I felt like I'd done something. I thought, fuck, first book I've read, and it had 900 pages. But it was hard… so, it still feels like a big achievement. Yeah, it was a fuckin massive achievement, even after all these years.

Learning to read also played a critical role in re-forming Ryan's identity more positively. As he mastered reading, he began to see himself not just as a juvenile offender, but as a capable and well-liked individual with a sense of identity and purpose.

> I just thought, I can read. I thought now I'm going to be able to do certain things.

Ryan's improved reading abilities significantly boosted his self-esteem and self-concept. His narrative highlights the transformative impact of educational achievements on self-perception and social interactions, leading to a more positive self-identity and enhanced personal growth.

7.2.3 Improvement in Cognitive Function

Learning to read was a pivotal factor in Ryan's cognitive development. Initially, with a reading age of six years, after four years of reading support, he had reached an age-appropriate level for a teenager. This significant improvement had both academic and cognitive implications. Psychological testing showed that Ryan's IQ increased from the first percentile (extremely low-borderline range) to the fifth percentile (borderline range of intelligence), meaning he was no longer classified as intellectually disabled.

IQ is generally assumed to remain constant across an individual's lifespan. Ryan's case demonstrates that significant improvements in cognitive abilities can be achieved through targeted educational interventions, specifically learning to read.

7.2.3.1 Cognitive Functioning Results on Admission to Detention

According to the psychologist, Ryan's IQ testing results when he first arrived in detention indicated a score between 60 and 71 IQ points, placing him in the extremely low to borderline range of intelligence, or the first percentile. This means less than one per cent of peers his age had a similar score on intellectual functioning. There were no significant differences between his verbal and nonverbal intellectual function, with equally poor scores across both domains. A brief academic test, the Wide Range Achievement Test 3 (WRAT-3), indicated that Ryan was spelling at a five-year-old level and reading at a six-year-old level.

7.2.3.2 Cognitive Functioning Results at Age 18 Years

At age 18, Ryan's Full-Scale IQ (FSIQ) was in the borderline range of intellectual functioning, between 71 and 80 IQ points, placing him in the fifth percentile. This means Ryan's score was better than five per cent of his peers his age, and he no longer fell in the lowest category. The results showed significant improvements in verbal comprehension ability compared to earlier testing, with his Verbal Comprehension Index score increasing significantly to be within the age-appropriate range for an 18-year-old. This was an increase of 12 years growth over his detention period. Further to this a progress report concluded that his involvement with the school while in detention had highly beneficial, with his increased confidence in literacy now apparent.

The improvement in cognitive ability was attributed to the significant increase in verbal IQ that had resulted from learning to read (Cunningham & Stanovich, 1993; Stanovich & Cunningham, 1997).

Ryan's significant cognitive improvement, particularly in verbal comprehension, underscores the impact of targeted educational interventions on intellectual development. His case challenges the assumption that IQ cannot be improved and highlighted the potential for cognitive growth that

can result from learning to read and accessing specialised support. It places reading as a pivotal factor in this process.

7.2.4 Developing Empathy.

The connection Ryan made between reading and developing a sense of empathy was unexpected, particularly in light of his history of brutality, violence, and documented evidence of his low levels of empathy. This finding holds potential significance within the justice rehabilitation space and is novel in this context. Ryan's narrative revealed that learning to read played a crucial role in fostering empathy, which like reading, is intrinsically linked to executive functioning. This development was not only significant for his personal growth but also offers insights into the broader potential of educational programs in rehabilitation.

Ryan explained his growing sense of empathy by comparing his response to stories from his childhood to his response after learning to read. He acknowledged that reading allowed him to experience emotions in a way that was more manageable and less direct than reflecting on his own feelings.

Reflecting on a childhood story:

> Like there was this one (story) I remember in Year 4. It was a beautiful story looking back on it, but when I was a kid, I couldn't give two shits. It was about a homeless man who ends up looking after a baby bird with a broken beak. It was a children's book for about Year 4/5, so kids that understand a bit more, and they'd be fuckin' like in tears but…me… I didn't relate to it. I couldn't show empathy for it. I was just, like, I don't give a fuck about this homeless fuck.

Describing his reaction to the Game of Thrones series of books read as an adult:

> That was a fuckin awesome read… I love them books. He reminded me of me. Yeah, I cry when I read, I've read a couple of books where there's been some sad chapters and it's broken me. I've sat there and cried. Like, bawled my eyes out… Yeah, I'm a lot more empathetic towards people, especially people I love and that, especially people I have a lot of time for. If they're having a bad day, I'll sit there and I'll fuckin make sure they're all right.

Ryan explained that he was not yet entirely comfortable with empathetic feelings, stating that it was 50/50 good and bad:

> For a long time, I was very shut off, and I don't like having the negative feelings that come with it (empathy)… and that was kind of a helpful thing when I couldn't read, I could shut things off. Now it's a lot more harder. But I think that's the part of becoming human again… yeah, as I've gotten older, I've become more fuckin' human.

Ryan's development of empathy through reading underscores the transformative power of literacy not only for cognitive and academic growth but also for enhancing executive functioning and emotional intelligence. Reading engages the brain's executive functioning, which is also used for the development of empathy. Ryan's experience suggests that by learning to read, his

executive functioning improved along as did his empathy and emotional regulation. His narrative illustrates how targeted educational interventions can help individuals reconnect with their humanity and develop deeper emotional connections with others. Harnessing the connections between reading, empathy and executive functioning has significant implications for rehabilitation programs.

7.3 Chapter Summary:

This chapter summarises Ryan's transformative journey through learning to read, emphasising its profound impact on his development and identity. It explores how literacy helped alleviate Ryan's marginalisation and fostered a sense of belonging. Additionally, it discusses how improved reading skills boosted his self-esteem, reshaped his self-concept, and contributed to cognitive growth. Furthermore, Ryan's narrative highlights the unexpected development of empathy through reading, underscoring the broader benefits of educational interventions in juvenile rehabilitation. The chapter concludes by discussing practical and policy implications, advocating for enhanced reading support in such settings.

CHAPTER 8

"For I have done these things and there is no way on earth of undoing them." Schlinck *The Reader (1997, p.193)*

8.1 Introduction to Discussion of Findings

Bernhard Schlink's novel, *The Reader* (1997), explores the transformative power of reading and its capacity to connect people, cultivate empathy, offer comfort, and provide a deeper understanding of one's actions and self. Similarly, the irreversible consequences of Ryan's actions are paralleled with his journey towards literacy and self-acceptance. This chapter examines the impact of reading on Ryan's transformation, emphasising that while past actions cannot be undone, the path to redemption and personal growth remains attainable through education and societal recognition.

Ryan's experiences illustrate how learning to read played a pivotal role in reducing his marginalisation, improving his self-esteem, enhancing his cognitive function, and fostering empathy. By providing a supportive and inclusive educational environment, the educational system acknowledged Ryan's right to learn and develop, empowering him to see himself as a capable learner and a valued individual. Framed by Honneth's recognition theory, this discussion explores how social recognition within educational contexts can significantly influence personal development, identity formation, and cognitive growth.

This chapter contextualises these findings within existing literature, highlighting the broader implications for educational practices and policies aimed at promoting equity and inclusion for marginalised youth. Through Ryan's story, we gain insight into the transformative power of recognition and the potential of targeted educational interventions to foster personal and societal growth.

8.2 Finding 1: Reduced Marginalisation and Increased Belonging

Ryan's narrative not only gives him his voice but also highlights the deeply destructive power of marginalisation throughout his early life. Through learning to read he extended himself, exposed his vulnerabilities and for the first time discovered the transformative effect of positive recognition. The pride he took in his newfound and hard-earned skills and the sense of achievement that came from succeeding at a task he had never previously managed played a significant role in transforming his self-identity. His evolution from an outsider to a respected and integrated member of his community (albeit within the confines of prison) evident by the significance he places on both the exclusion and his newfound experience of inclusion.

Being able to read contributed to this sense of self-worth, reduced feelings of

marginalisation, and increased his sense of belonging. Initially his feelings of exclusion and marginalisation were exacerbated by his difficulties with reading and learning and his resulting frustration further alienated him from his peers. However, a noticeable change coincided with his developing reading skills and a growing sense of self-confidence and social interaction. As his reading skills improved, so did his ability to engage academically and socially, gaining positive recognition from peers and teachers. This positive reinforcement was crucial in reshaping his identity and sense of belonging, as posited by recognition theory (Kidd & Castano, 2013). The development of these skills provided a foundation for better social interactions and self-perception, further enhancing his self-worth (Diamond & Ling, 2020).

Marginalised children often show deficits in executive functioning which includes skills such as working memory, flexible thinking, and self-control. The same skill set required to become a successful reader, problem solve and achieve academic success, due to the cumulative effects of stress and inadequate educational opportunities (Hackman, Farah, & Meaney, 2010). As marginalisation is known to impair executive functioning, recognition theory adds to the further understanding of this phenomenon.

8.2.1 Comparison to Literature

Comparing Ryan's experience with the literature on marginalisation underscores the critical role of educational interventions in mitigating the negative effects of marginalisation. Ryan's journey demonstrates the positive outcomes achievable through target support, while reflecting the ongoing challenges in ensuring equitable access to education and addressing systemic inequalities that perpetuate marginalisation among adolescents. This comparison also emphasises that education, particularly literacy, is not merely an academic endeavour but an effective rehabilitative strategy that can significantly contribute to personal growth and social reintegration.

Ryan's journey illustrates the profound impact of marginalisation on educational outcomes. His early struggles, both academically and socially, underscore how his marginalisation created significant barriers to accessing education and achieving academic success. As Wenham (2019) argues, the failure to learn to read can mark the beginning of differential treatment among students, perpetuating cycles of marginalisation. Ryan's recollection of marginalisation is indicative of the influence this had on his behavioural patterns and social interactions. His experiences of aggression and social withdrawal reflect a common response among marginalised adolescents seeking acceptance or coping with rejection, as noted by Arslan & Allen (2021) and highlights the importance of peer and school connections in mitigating such behaviours and the associated detrimental effects.

Ryan's story also highlights the increased mental health risks associated with marginalisation, with his feelings of anger and aggression resonating with the broader research

linking marginalisation to an increased risk of mental health disorders, that can be exacerbated by exclusionary practices in educational settings (Rikala, 2019).

In relation to the value of reading intervention and support, Ryan's narrative presents contrasting stages. Before incarceration, inadequate educational support exacerbated his exclusion and academic difficulties, aligning with literature suggesting systemic shortcomings in supporting marginalised adolescents. However, his experience during juvenile incarceration, where he received personalised success-based educational support and increased recognition, led to significant improvements in his academic performance, sense of belonging and well-being. This approach, while very effective for Ryan, may not be universally accessible due to resource constraints or systemic barriers.

The literature emphasises long-term consequences such as unemployment and social exclusion for marginalised adolescents stating that limited education leads to ongoing social exclusion and poverty and further reduces the likelihood of academic and social success (Arnez & Condry, 2021). Despite these challenges, Ryan's positive educational trajectory and increased confidence point to the potential of targeted interventions in mitigating these adverse outcomes. Although still incarcerated, his participation in the prison employment program underscores the importance of meaningful activities in fostering a sense of self-worth and contributing positively to rehabilitation efforts.

Ryan's narrative underscores the importance of addressing systemic inequalities through effective educational practices. By providing targeted specialist support, recognition and understanding, educators and policymakers can potentially disrupt cycles of marginalisation and empower these students to aspire to brighter educational and social futures.

The finding of decreased marginalisation, as observed in Ryan's case, holds several broader implications that contribute significantly to the field of juvenile offender education.

1. **Improved Academic Performance:** Ryan's improvement in his academic skills and engagement were accompanied by a reduction in his marginalisation and an increase in his sense of belonging. This suggests that supportive educational practices can enhance students' learning outcomes and address issues of marginalisation.
2. **Enhanced Social Skills:** Through his increased literacy Ryan was able to participate more fully in classroom activities and build relationships with other students. This contributed to a reduction in his sense of marginalisation and allowed him to experience some social integration. This is crucial for students' overall well-being and their ability to collaborate more effectively.
3. **Positive Self-concept:** Decreased marginalisation positively impacted Ryan's self-esteem and self-concept. This finding underscores the psychological benefits of feeling

valued and accepted within one's educational environment. Addressing marginalisation can potentially reduce behavioural issues associated with feelings of alienation or rejection. This contributes to a more positive school climate and supports students in developing coping mechanisms and resilience.

4. **Mitigation of Social Disparities:** By reducing marginalisation, schools can contribute to the mitigation of broader social disparities. By addressing the causes of marginalisation early in education can reduce the risk of a student experiencing negative long-term outcomes such as unemployment, poverty, and involvement in criminal activities.

8.2.2 Contribution to Disciplines

This finding contributes to the fields of education, psychology, and juvenile justice by demonstrating that through the judicious use of targeted interventions and a supportive educational environment, even students thought to be “unteachable” can succeed and access the benefits of improved self-esteem and increased social and educational inclusion and success. This finding challenges schools to prioritise recognition and support by using success-based learning to support struggling students, especially those that are most marginalised. Ryan's narrative serves as an example for educators, policymakers, and researchers, highlighting the effectiveness of personalised interventions in promoting student success and well-being.

8.2.3 Limitations

While the study demonstrates that learning to read significantly reduced Ryan's sense of marginalisation and increased his sense of belonging, this finding is based on a single case study. The generalisability of this result to other juvenile offenders may be limited. Individual differences, such as personality traits, previous educational experiences, and the specific context of incarceration, may influence the extent to which reading can mitigate feelings of marginalization. Additionally, the study relies heavily on Ryan's self-reported experiences, which may be subject to recall bias or social desirability bias.

8.3 Finding 2: Improved Self-Esteem and Self-Concept

The second major finding of this study highlights the significant improvement in Ryan's self-esteem and self-concept following his acquisition of reading skills. This improvement was evident in Ryan's self-reported feelings of pride and achievement, which underscores the psychological and emotional benefits associated with becoming literate. Understanding this finding in the context of existing literature reveals several important dimensions of the relationship between reading ability and self-esteem, particularly for marginalised and at-risk youth.

8.3.1 Comparison to Literature

The literature on self-esteem and reading is extensive. Self-esteem is a critical component of an individual's overall psychological well-being, influencing behaviour, attitudes, and motivation (Dedmond, 2009). Children and adolescents with reading difficulties often experience heightened levels of anxiety, depression, and conduct disorders, as noted by Boyes et al. (2020). These mental health challenges are frequently linked to negative self-perceptions, embarrassment, and frustration arising from their struggles with literacy. In Ryan's case, his inability to read during his primary school years led to significant negative self-assessment and contributed to his behavioural issues, consistent with the patterns observed in the literature. His narrative speaks of being impressed with himself and of his sense of achievement after learning to read. These align with findings that improved literacy skills can mitigate internalising symptoms and enhance self-esteem. This shift suggests that successful interventions targeting literacy can have far-reaching positive effects beyond academic performance, contributing to overall mental health and well-being.

A key aspect of the literature involves the complex interplay between literacy struggles and school attendance, particularly truancy. Historical analyses such as the study by Maughan et al. (1996), and a local study by the South Australian government Australia (Law Society South Australia, 2007) attribute illiteracy among male juvenile offenders to poor school attendance with truancy deemed to be a major factor in the low educational achievement levels among juvenile repeat offenders.

Ryan’s narrative does not support this sequence and offers an alternative insight into the claim that truancy results in illiteracy. His earlier school experiences were marked by frustration and alienation due to his reading struggles, which contributed to his eventual disengagement from school system. This disengagement was characterised by academic failure rather than truancy, although his poor behaviour resulted in a significant amount of time excluded from the classroom. His eventual success and improvement in reading, along with the corresponding boost in self-esteem disrupted this cycle, demonstrating the potential for targeted literacy interventions to break the link between reading difficulties and school absenteeism. Ryan’s narrative suggests the opposite to the assumption that illiteracy is the result of truancy, rather, illiteracy is a cause of truancy.

This finding has implications for educational and rehabilitative practices, underscoring the importance of targeted and sustained reading support for at-risk youth, particularly those within or at risk of entering the juvenile justice system. Addressing reading difficulties simultaneously enhances self-esteem and can mitigate some of the adverse outcomes associated with marginalisation and disengagement from education.

Additionally, this finding also highlights the essential role that learning to read plays within the

rehabilitation process. Ryan's narrative exemplifies how learning to read can lead to significant gains in self-esteem and self-concept, improved mental health and social integration, and underscores the significance that learning to read plays within the broader context of rehabilitative strategies for at-risk populations.

8.3.2 Limitations

The improvement in Ryan's self-esteem and self-concept as a result of learning to read is a significant finding. However, factors, such as psychological support, peer interactions, and maturation, may have also contributed to these improvements. Moreover, self-esteem and self-concept are complex constructs influenced by various internal and external factors, and the study's qualitative nature limits the ability to measure these constructs with precision.

8.4 Finding 3: Improvement in Cognitive Function

The third finding was unexpected. IQ testing by psychologists before and after Ryan learned to read showed a notable improvement in cognitive function, moving him from the first to the fifth percentile in comparison to his peers. This finding challenges the commonly held idea that IQ remains static over a person's lifetime, suggesting that significant cognitive growth can occur through targeted educational interventions, particularly with reading.

On arrival at the detention centre, Ryan's IQ testing placed him in the extremely low to borderline range of intelligence (first percentile) and sufficiently low to be considered an intellectual disability. However, at age 18 after learning to read his IQ had risen into the fifth percentile moving him out of the intellectual disability range. His verbal comprehension ability had increased from being equivalent to a six-year-old’s to within the age-appropriate range for an 18-year-old, a change of 12 years over the detention period. This dramatic improvement in verbal IQ, attributed by his psychologist to learning to read, was also considered to be central to his improved social skills and confidence.

Ryan's significant cognitive improvement, especially in verbal comprehension, can be linked to the enhancement of his executive functioning skills through learning to read. Executive functions, which encompass cognitive processes such as working memory, cognitive flexibility, and inhibitory control, are essential for managing and coordinating the complex tasks involved in reading (Cartwright, 2012). As his ability to read grew, so too it seems, did his executive functioning.

8.4.1 Alignment to Theoretical Perspective

While the direct connection between improved cognitive function and recognition theory might not be immediately apparent, there are indirect pathways through which recognition (in terms

of rights, solidarity, and social inclusion) can impact cognitive and educational outcomes. Ryan's case shows how educational recognition and support can lead to significant personal and cognitive growth, suggesting that creating environments where individuals feel recognised and valued can have far-reaching effects on their development.

By providing Ryan with the educational support he needed, the education system acknowledged his right to learn and develop, which aligns with Honneth's dimension of rights. The progress Ryan made can be interpreted as the detention school recognising and addressing his unique needs with the acknowledgment that came from this having empowered him to see himself as a capable learner. The recognition from educators and peers reinforced positive learning behaviours and cognitive engagement.

8.4.2 Comparison to Literature

Ryan's cognitive improvement aligns with the current neurobiological understanding of the relationship between executive function and reading. As the science of neurobiology advances, its relevance to education becomes increasingly significant, reinforcing the insights of educational theorists and researchers.

Vygotsky (1978) proposed that language and literacy are fundamental to cognitive growth, a notion now confirmed through neuroscientific research. Studies have demonstrated that learning to read induces structural and functional changes in the brain, particularly in regions associated with language processing and executive functions. For instance, reading has been linked to increased grey matter volume in areas of the brain involved in visual word recognition (Carreiras et al., 2009). Similarly, the prefrontal cortex, responsible for executive functions, is activated during reading comprehension (Friederici, 2012).

Cognitive functions, particularly executive functions, are crucial for effective behaviour control and essential tasks such as planning, decision-making, and problem-solving. These functions include attentional control, working memory, cognitive flexibility, and inhibitory control (Diamond, 2013). They are fundamental for learning and adapting to new situations, developing and changing throughout life. Significantly, trauma and negative educational experiences can negatively affect these abilities while positive experiences can enhance them (Chan et al., 2008).

Learning to read, while foundational for academic success, is a very complex process. It requires students to decode text, understand syntax, comprehend meaning (Cartwright, 2012), hold and manipulate information, shift between different components of reading, and focus on relevant information while ignoring distractions (Swanson & Jerman, 2007; Follmer, 2018). These intricate cognitive processes necessitate the effective management and coordination of executive functions to integrate visual, auditory, and linguistic information (Snowling & Hulme, 2012).

Non-readers appear to be caught in a "Catch-22 situation" where the process of learning to read strengthens and enhances executive function, difficulties with executive functions make learning to read more challenging.

Ryan's significant improvements seem to have been affected by his daily engagement in the process of learning to read, suggesting it may have functioned as a form of "brain training," improving his literacy skills and enhancing overall cognitive abilities as evidenced by his increased IQ and significantly improved verbal comprehension. His experience illustrates the role reading plays in fostering broader cognitive advancements, extending to critical thinking and problem-solving skills. This connection underscores the importance of addressing literacy deficits to support cognitive and intellectual growth, particularly among individuals with multiple educational risks.

8.4.3 Implications

The implications derived from Ryan's significant cognitive improvement, particularly in verbal comprehension, underscores the impact of targeted educational interventions on intellectual development. His case challenges the assumption that IQ is static and highlights the potential for cognitive growth resulting from learning to read and accessing specialised support. This finding contributes to both education, psychology by:

1. **Reaffirming the Importance of Literacy Programs:** It emphasises the critical role that learning to read plays in enhancing cognitive function and overall intellectual development.
2. **Supporting Educational Interventions:** It provides evidence for the effectiveness of targeted educational interventions in improving cognitive outcomes for marginalised youth.
3. **Highlighting the Role of Recognition:** It indirectly supports the notion that recognising and addressing individual learning needs can lead to significant cognitive and personal development.

8.4.4 Limitations

Improved Cognitive Function: The study suggests that learning to read enhanced Ryan's cognitive functions, including working memory, cognitive flexibility, and attentional control. While the assessment of cognitive improvements was primarily based on quantitative data the extent to which these improvements are directly correlated with reading is uncertain. Areas related to reading showed the most improvement, however, cognitive development is influenced by a range of factors, including mental health, individual learning differences and changes to the level of engagement Ryan had with the testing over a four-year interval.

8.5 Finding 4: Developing Empathy

The profound connection made by Ryan between reading and developing empathy was for him the most significant result of learning to read. This was an unexpected finding and one that has significance to the broader field of prisoner rehabilitation. It also requires further consideration and research to fully understand the mechanisms through which this occurred.

Ryan's significant improvement in empathy, as evidenced by his sense of becoming more “human,” indicates the role that reading played in enhancing his capacity for empathy. His experiences with books provided a safe environment to be exposed to, explore and react to different emotional scenarios, helping him to develop both understanding another person's mental state (cognitive empathy) and his ability to share and vicariously experience the emotions (affective empathy).

8.5.1 Comparison to Literature

Studies have shown that reading, particularly fiction, can improve empathy by allowing readers to experience diverse perspectives and practice perspective-taking (Mar et al., 2006) and requires the engagement of several executive functions such as working memory, cognitive flexibility, and attentional control (Mar et al., 2006). These functions are crucial for tracking plotlines, understanding character development, and perspective-taking. Longitudinal studies have also demonstrated that advanced language ability and reading comprehension predict greater empathy and prosocial behaviours over time (Ensor et al., 2011; Rhee et al., 2013). Language-based interventions have been shown to enhance children's empathy scores and prosocial behaviours, highlighting the critical role of language in fostering empathetic responses (Ornaghi et al., 2017).

Similarly, a connection between empathy and executive functions has also been established independently of reading. Executive functioning significantly contributes to empathy development by supporting perspective-taking and emotional regulation. These higher-order cognitive processes, managed by the prefrontal cortex, include inhibitory control, cognitive flexibility, and working memory, all of which are essential for understanding and responding to others' emotions (Decety & Meyer, 2008; Zaki & Ochsner, 2012). This aligns with the literature on the role of executive functions in empathy, where cognitive flexibility and working memory support the ability to hold and manipulate information about others' experiences, and inhibitory control allows for the temporary suspension of one's own viewpoint to better engage with the lives of others (Decety & Lamm, 2006).

Executive functioning appears to be the thread linking findings three and four. Typically, diagrams representing these connections depict them as hierarchical, with executive functioning

branching into different domains. Ryan's results, however, suggest the possibility that these connections were less linear and more circular. While executive functioning supported him to learn to read and to develop empathy, the process of learning to read seems to have contributed to improvements in his executive functioning capacity. Likewise, increased reading ability provided Ryan with both the ability and opportunity to engage with fictional characters and their stories, while this required the use of executive functions, which facilitated the understanding and sharing of emotions (Bal & Veltkamp, 2013; Kidd & Castano, 2013). This circular model suggests that improvements in one area (e.g., reading) can stimulate growth in another (e.g., executive functioning), which in turn enhances a third (e.g., empathy), creating a reinforcing loop that promotes overall cognitive and emotional development.

There are multiple interconnections between these attributes and to the literature and were summarised for easy reference in Figure 12 below.

Aspect	Key Points	Connection
Executive Function (EF) and Reading Development	- Executive functions are critical for reading comprehension (Spencer, Richmond, & Cutting, 2020). - Skills such as working memory, inhibitory control, and cognitive flexibility are essential for decoding and understanding text.	- Ryan's development of reading skills engaged and strengthened these executive functions. - Improved executive function helped Ryan manage his behavior and focus his cognitive resources more effectively.
Executive Function (EF) and Empathy Development	- Executive functions are involved in empathy (Taiwo, 2018). - Cognitive processes like perspective-taking and inhibition of immediate responses are integral to empathetic responses.	- Improvement in executive functioning through reading enhanced Ryan's capacity for empathy. - Engaging with characters' lives in fiction helped Ryan practice perspective-taking and emotional regulation.
Executive Function (EF) and Behavior	- Deficits in executive functions are linked to behavioral disorders (Nikolašević et al., 2024). - Poor inhibitory control and working memory are common in ADHD, ODD, and CD, leading to impulsivity and emotional difficulties.	- Improved executive functions led to better behavioral outcomes for Ryan. - Engagement in reading acted as cognitive training, enhancing his executive functions and leading to improved behavior.
Reading and Empathy	- Fiction reading enhances empathy through emotional transportation (Bal & Veltkamp, 2013). - Readers develop a deeper understanding and compassion for others' emotions by becoming emotionally engaged with characters.	- Fiction reading provided Ryan with a safe space to explore complex emotions, fostering his empathic abilities. - Development of empathy through reading contributed to Ryan's moral rehabilitation and reshaped his social interactions.
Synthesis: Reading, Empathy, Executive Function, and Behavior	- Executive function skills like cognitive flexibility and inhibitory control are critical for reading comprehension and empathy. - Reading exercises executive functions, improving cognitive control and behavior. - Enhanced executive functions and empathy lead to better emotional regulation and social interactions.	- Reading improved Ryan's cognitive skills, empathy, and behavior. - Positive recognition from others reinforced his self-esteem and moral development. - Literacy programs focusing on engaging narratives can have multifaceted benefits for individuals with similar challenges.

Figure.12 Interrelations between reading and executive function (compiled by author)

This also raises the possibility that the process of learning to read, alongside the reading of the books was a major contributor to these changes, i.e. "brain training." Ryan had short but

frequent and highly targeted reading instruction designed to ensure the texts were sufficiently challenging without being frustrating, on an almost daily basis. This maximised his learning and supported the development of his executive functions.

The possibility that through learning to read prisoners might be able to increase their levels of empathy has considerable significance for the rehabilitation of offenders. It offers a low cost and accessible means of enhancing empathy within the prison population while simultaneously providing the additional benefits of improved literacy.

8.5.2 Contribution to Disciplines

The possibility of developing empathy through learning to read, along with its connection to executive functioning offers several significant contributions to the education and those connected with juvenile rehabilitation:

a. **Integration of Cognitive and Emotional Development**: The section highlights the interconnectedness of reading with cognitive growth, executive functioning, and emotional development through empathy. These connections warrant further investigation to explore the effectiveness of actively developing empathy in offenders through reading support.
b. **Novel Circular Model**: The conceptualisation of the connections between reading, executive function, empathy, and cognitive development as circular, offers a different perspective on how these elements might interact. This model differs from the traditional linear models and suggests that these processes support and reinforce each other in a continuous, iterative cycle, which can have practical implications for educational and rehabilitation interventions.
c. **Participant's Voice**: Ryan's narrative gives voice to a rarely heard perspective and expresses the fundamental and profound changes that learning to read had for him. It repositions reading as a central component of his social rehabilitation and personal growth. He expresses the value reading, particularly fiction, played in developing his empathy. His perspective underscores the value of integrating reading programs into educational and rehabilitative contexts to foster both cognitive and emotional growth.
d. **Implications for Educational and Therapeutic Interventions**: Ryan's narrative supports the idea that learning to read and improving literacy has benefits beyond academic progress and that it should be placed more centrally within the landscape of rehabilitation, becoming a core component of all rehabilitation programs. For example, incorporating structured reading programs as part of therapeutic offerings could be an effective strategy for promoting empathy and cognitive development.
e. **Potential for Further Research**: The findings suggest further research into the interplay between reading, executive function, empathy, and cognitive development. It encourages exploration of the circular model in different contexts and populations, potentially leading to a

deeper and more nuanced understanding of these relationships. It offers an innovative perspective on the development of empathy through reading, and their intricate connections with executive functioning and contributes to the practical application of education in rehabilitative settings.

8.5.3 Limitations

Increased Capacity for Empathy and Positive Social Interactions: Ryan's narrative indicates that reading enhanced his empathy and social interactions. However, qualitative research is inherently interpretive, and these findings are based on Ryan's subjective accounts and my analysis. The absence of objective measures of empathy or social behaviour means that these findings cannot be easily validated or compared with other studies. Additionally, my presence and interaction with Ryan might have influenced his responses, introducing potential bias. The contextual nature of qualitative data means that these findings are specific to Ryan's experiences and may not be generalisable to other juvenile offenders.

8.6 Recognition Theory and its Application to the Findings

Honneth's recognition theory posits that individuals develop their identity through social recognition, which includes being respected, valued, and acknowledged within institutions, including schools. This theory provides a useful framework for understanding the four key findings from Ryan's narrative:

1. Increased sense of belonging
2. Improved self-concept
3. Cognitive function enhancement
4. Empathy development.

Recognition theory underscores that positive recognition supports personal development by fostering a sense of belonging and acceptance. Ryan's transition from marginalisation to acceptance illustrates how being recognised and valued within educational settings can enhance students' self-worth and identity. His narrative highlights the importance of inclusive educational environments that promote equity and well-being, ensuring all students feel recognised and valued. While recognition theory explains the positive impact of recognition on Ryan's sense of belonging, it also challenges educators to address intersecting forms of marginalisation based on race, gender, or disability.

Honneth identifies three forms of recognition essential for personal development: love (emotional support), rights (cognitive respect), and solidarity (social esteem). Ryan's journey from illiteracy to proficiency reflects his receipt of these forms of recognition. Supportive teachers and peers who believed in Ryan's ability provided emotional recognition, crucial for building his self-

confidence and engagement in learning. Developing reading skills enabled Ryan to participate fully in educational activities, allowing him cognitive respect through which he began to see himself as a capable learner, deserving of educational opportunities. Learning to read enabled Ryan to integrate more successfully into his social environment, improving his self-respect and the respect given to him by others. His academic performance and reading skills led to a stronger sense of social belonging and self-esteem. Recognition theory suggests that recognition is a social process fostering individual growth and societal integration, directly aligning with Ryan's improved self-esteem and self-concept.

While the direct connection between improved cognitive function and recognition theory might not be immediately apparent, there are indirect pathways through which recognition (in terms of rights and social inclusion) can impact cognitive and educational outcomes. Ryan's case shows how educational recognition and support can lead to significant personal and cognitive growth, suggesting that creating environments where individuals feel recognised and valued can have far-reaching effects on their development. By providing Ryan with the educational support he needed, the education system acknowledged his right to learn and develop, which aligns with Honneth's dimension of rights. The progress Ryan made can be interpreted as the detention school recognising and addressing his unique needs, with this acknowledgment empowering him to see himself as a capable learner. The recognition from educators and peers reinforced positive learning behaviours and cognitive engagement.

Empathy is essential for meaningful social interactions and relationships. While recognition theory primarily focuses on the social and relational aspects of human development, the development of empathy through reading aligns with the theory's emphasis on the importance of mutual recognition for individual well-being and social integration. Recognition theory emphasises that social integration and personal identity are fostered through mutual recognition and that individuals require recognition from others to develop a healthy sense of self. Increased empathy, the ability to understand and share the feelings of others, therefore supports both giving and receiving recognition. While the development of empathy through improved executive functioning supports the idea that social and emotional growth is interconnected with cognitive development.

Ryan's increased levels of empathy supported him in gaining social recognition, which in turn supported his cognitive and emotional development, suggesting that educational programs can serve as a means of social recognition that aids both the development of empathy and cognitive functions. Learning to read played a pivotal role in improving Ryan's empathy. Through emotional transportation, perspective-taking, cognitive engagement, and the safe practise environment provided by fiction, he was able to develop a deeper understanding of and capacity for empathy. This development not only enhanced his social interactions and relationships but also supported

his overall rehabilitation, suggesting that reading programs could be a valuable tool in fostering empathy and social growth in rehabilitation contexts.

Honneth's recognition theory allows for an understanding of how social recognition within educational settings can significantly impact marginalised students' personal and cognitive development. It challenges educators to create environments that offer emotional support, cognitive respect, and social esteem, thereby promoting equity and well-being for all students.

8.7 Limitations of Study

This section addresses the limitations associated with the key findings on Ryan's development through learning to read i.e. reduced marginalisation and increased sense of belonging, improved self-esteem, and self-concept, improved cognitive function and the development of empathy. Despite the positive gains the following limitations are noted:

1. **Generalisability:** Ryan's case is unique and may not represent the experiences of all marginalised students or at-risk youth. Individual differences such as background, personality, and the nature of marginalisation impact the generalisability of the findings. More extensive research with larger, diverse samples are necessary to confirm these outcomes.
2. **Context-Specific Factors:** The interventions' effectiveness in reducing marginalisation and fostering cognitive and emotional growth may have been influenced by the specific conditions of the juvenile detention setting. These conditions may not be replicable in other settings, affecting the broader applicability of the findings.
3. **Measurement Challenges:** Quantifying and measuring reductions in marginalisation and improvements in empathy and executive functioning can be challenging. Subjective assessments, self-reporting, and variations in psychological testing tools and methods can impact the reliability and comparability of the findings. Further controlled studies are necessary to isolate the specific impact of literacy on these aspects.
4. **Ethical Considerations:** Addressing marginalisation and targeting interventions involves ethical considerations, including the potential stigmatising of students and further isolating them from their peers. Interventions must be inclusive, respectful of autonomy, and culturally sensitive.
5. **Resource Constraints:** Implementing effective interventions requires substantial resources, including financial support, trained personnel, and time commitment. Limited resources may pose barriers to scaling successful interventions for a larger population of marginalised students.
6. **Causality and Correlation:** While correlations between reading, empathy, and cognitive function are evident, direct causality has not been established. Other factors, such as

maturation, psychological support, and engagement in cognitive activities, may have contributed to the observed improvements.

7. **Long-Term Sustainability:** Although Ryan's progress has been established over many years, no additional testing was undertaken to verify his claims that he was still an active and able reader. Therefore, the long-term sustainability of the cognitive and emotional gains observed in Ryan is uncertain. Additional longitudinal studies are needed to assess the durability of these benefits once Ryan is released and reintegrated into the community.
8. **Other Influences:** Ryan's development cannot be solely attributed to reading. Other influences, such as therapeutic interventions, social interactions, and his overall environment, also played a role in his cognitive and emotional growth. Acknowledging these factors avoids over-attributing his development to reading alone.
9. **Sample Size and Diversity:** The findings are based on a single case study, limiting the ability to draw broader conclusions. Larger and more diverse sample sizes are necessary to validate these findings and enhance their applicability to different contexts and populations.

By acknowledging these limitations, this study underscores the need for further research to understand better the complex, multidirectional connections between literacy, cognitive development, and personal growth in marginalised and delinquent youth.

8.8 Conclusion

The research aimed to explore the participant's perception of the transformative power of learning to read, how marginalisation through illiteracy is interconnected with school failure and delinquency, and to consider how Ryan's narrative contributes to a nuanced understanding of juvenile offender rehabilitation. It argued that reading should be moved from its current peripheral placement within the rehabilitation process and repositioned more centrally as a core component.

By asking the question "How has learning to read as a teenager influenced a juvenile offender's perception of himself?" it explored the transformative potential of learning to read for juvenile offenders through Ryan's personal and addressed the well-documented link between illiteracy and crime (Brozo, 2002; Scully, 2015; Vacca, 2021), and educational marginalisation through his narrative.

The research focussed on the intricate relationship between reading, school failure, and juvenile offending, and on the potential of education as rehabilitation through the nuanced and in-depth narrative of one offender. While the primary research question sought to understand how learning to read has shaped Ryan's development, his personal narrative highlights the contribution reading has made to his emotional and moral development, highlighting the significance that recognition (or the lack of it) played in shaping his identity before and after learning to read.

Addressing these issues is essential, as the dominant narratives within juvenile offender rehabilitation are seated in psychology and criminology and prioritise the risk of reoffending through targeting criminal behaviour risk factors. While acknowledging that many juvenile offenders have poor literacy, the significant rehabilitative potential that learning to read can offer many of these young offenders is often overlooked. This research addresses this gap by emphasising the transformative role that learning to read has, not only in terms of general education but as a central part of rehabilitation.

8.7.1 Key Findings

These key findings collectively demonstrate the transformative potential of reading for juvenile offenders. By reducing marginalisation, improving self-esteem, enhancing cognitive function, and increasing empathy, literacy interventions, particularly learning to read, can play a central role in the holistic rehabilitation of young offenders.

1. Ryan's sense of marginalisation decreased and his sense of belonging increased. Before his incarceration, Ryan's very low literacy and the associated educational failures and poor behaviour had isolated him from his peers. Through learning to read and the social and educational opportunities that this brought, he experienced a new sense of connection to, and acceptance by those around him, which fostered in him, a greater sense of inclusion and community. This underscores the importance of addressing educational marginalisation that results from illiteracy both before and after offending.
2. Self-esteem and self-concept were improved through the process of learning to read had. Gaining literacy skills allowed Ryan to achieve academic success for the first time, which boosted his confidence and altered his perception of himself. This transformation illustrates how educational achievements can enhance self-worth and motivate positive behavioural changes. Recognising and supporting the development of self-esteem through prioritising functional literacy is essential for effective rehabilitation programs.
3. Ryan's cognitive function (IQ) saw significant improvement after learning to read as indicated by psychological testing results. After learning to read his IQ moved from the first to the fifth percentile relative to his same age peers with the greatest improvement in his verbal comprehension and was attributed to learning to read. The cognitive demands of reading require the engagement of working memory, cognitive flexibility, and attentional control (executive functions). This finding aligns with research that links executive functions to both reading and broader cognitive growth and opens the possibility that for Ryan, the process of learning to read functioned as a form of “brain training.”
4. Ryan's capacity for empathy and positive social interactions increased. This was the most unexpected and significant finding. Engaging with fictional narratives provided him with opportunities to understand and share the emotions of diverse characters, which in turn

enhanced his empathetic abilities and facilitated better social interactions and a greater ability to connect with others. Interestingly, the interplay between empathy and executive functions also parallelled the interplay between reading and executive functioning, suggesting that there may be circuitous connections between these processes.

8.7.2 Theoretical Implications

The findings illustrate how reading can foster social recognition and personal identity development and align well with recognition theory which posits that recognition within social contexts is essential for self-realisation. Ryan's journey of learning to read and its transformative effects is illustrative of both the benefits of recognition and the consequence of its absence. Improved literacy skills allowed Ryan to gain self-respect (cognitive function and self-esteem), social esteem (empathy and social interactions), and love (sense of belonging), illustrating the three forms of recognition identified by Honneth. This integration of recognition theory into the understanding of literacy's role in rehabilitation highlights the importance of social validation and mutual recognition in the rehabilitative process.

The findings also raise questions about the interplay between learning to read, executive functions, and social-emotional development in juvenile offenders, by demonstrating that learning to read made a significant contribution to Ryan's cognitive functions, self-esteem, and empathy. This study supports existing theories linking literacy to broader cognitive and social-emotional benefits but also proposes a circular model where reading, executive function, empathy, and cognitive development are interconnected in a mutually reinforcing manner. This model differs from the traditional linear concept of the relationships between these elements by suggesting that each element supports and enhances the others, creating a dynamic process of continuous improvement. This may inform future research and interventions aimed at understanding and leveraging the full potential of literacy in rehabilitation contexts.

8.7.3 Practical Implications

The practical implications of this research are profound, particularly for the design and implementation of rehabilitation programs for juvenile offenders. The evidence that learning to read can reduce feelings of marginalisation, improve self-esteem, enhance cognitive function, and increase empathy underscores the importance of integrating targeted literacy programs into the rehabilitation process. Facilitating and prioritising interventions that target the development of functional reading levels will enhance other rehabilitative programs. Furthermore, the study highlights the benefits of extending rehabilitation beyond criminogenic and psychological risk factors by incorporating specialist educational support. Recognising the transformative potential of literacy can lead to more effective rehabilitation strategies that promote long-term positive outcomes for juvenile offenders.

8.9 Limitations of Key Findings

While this qualitative study provides deep insights into Ryan's personal transformation through reading, and gives him his voice, it comes with inherent limitations. These include issues of generalisability, potential biases in self-reported data, and the interpretive nature of the findings. Future research could benefit from triangulating qualitative insights with quantitative measures to enhance the robustness and applicability of the findings.

8.10 Recommendations for Future Research

These findings could be enhanced by broadening the research beyond a single participant to create findings that can be generalised. Suggestions include:

8.9.1 Expanded Sample Size and Diversity

Future research should involve a larger and more diverse group of juvenile offenders to enhance the generalisability of findings related to the impact of reading on different demographics and offences, providing a more comprehensive understanding of its rehabilitative potential.

8.9.2 Longitudinal Studies

Conducting longitudinal studies would allow researchers to track the long-term effects of reading interventions. This approach can help determine whether improvements in empathy, cognitive function, and self-esteem are sustained over time and how these changes influence recidivism and reintegration into society.

8.9.3 Mechanisms of Impact

Studies should delve deeper into the mechanisms through which reading impacts empathy and cognitive function. Neuroimaging and other advanced methodologies could explore how reading influences brain function and structure, providing a scientific basis for observed behavioural changes**.**

8.9.4 Implementation and Practical Application

Educational research should focus on the practical implementation of high-quality reading programs in juvenile detention centres.

8.9.5 Interdisciplinary Approaches

Encouraging interdisciplinary research that combines insights from education, psychology, neuroscience, and criminology can create a more comprehensive understanding of the role of reading in rehabilitation.

8.11 Final Thoughts

This study set out to understand how learning to read impacted an incarcerated man who was imprisoned as a child for committing a heinous crime against an elderly person. It was driven by my experience of teaching juvenile offenders to read and observing the changes in their behaviour and self-belief that this seemed to bring about.

Ryan was chosen for this study, not because of his exceptionality, but because he was in effect, an amalgam of all the difficulties that surround learning and socialisation. The school system had failed him, his self-worth was based on being known as the bad-boy and, like so many other students that I had observed over the years, learning to read was both his greatest challenge and his greatest achievement.

Ryan's narrative is both powerful and poignant as he describes the isolation and despair he felt at school, alongside the excitement he felt when he was given individual attention outside the classroom. His narrative underscores the transformative effect of reading, highlighting how literacy acquisition extends beyond academic achievement to enhance cognitive, emotional, and social development.

At the very beginning of this thesis in the abstract, I was guided by the time honoured three interrogatives for setting out research investigation. What? Why and how? Now in the coda to the conclusion, we have come full circle and return to these three questions, but in a slightly different order. Much of this thesis has been about the how and the what, not only in terms of the methods of investigation, but also about how and what Ryan learned to read and about how and what has changed his life, his view of the world and his ability to empathise with others.

But most significantly there are the whys? Why is his story important, why did learning to read matter so much to him, why is something as seemingly fundamental as learning to read the focus of a thesis? Why, when prison rehabilitation programs address criminogenic behaviours does reading even matter?

Ryan answers this question simply and profoundly in just a few words. It matters because "Reading…, it made me human again."

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APPENDICIES

Appendix 1: Language and Communication Screening Assessment

Snow's (2005) research shed light on the prevalence of language disorders among juvenile offenders, prompting my interest in integrating a language screening measure into our protocols. However, the practicality of administering the extensive CELF-IV assessment to all students was infeasible, given our annual intake of hundreds of students.

Recognising the need to identify at-risk students swiftly, I collaborated with a colleague from the UK and a Department for Education Speech Pathologist to adapt and tailor a screening tool to suit the needs of the school, with particular attention paid to the challenges faced by First Nation students. Following a rigorous six-month trial, during which we correlated results with those obtained from the CELF-IV, the screening tool proved effective in accurately identifying students at risk of language difficulties.

While quick and easy to administer, this streamlined screening assessment provided indications of difficulties in receptive, expressive, and social language skills. Notably, we detected that simple tasks, such as having students recite the months of the year, served as reliable indicators of potential language issues, especially pertinent for First Nations students. This enables rapid implementation of in-class strategies such as:

1. Pausing between instructions.
2. Keeping sentences short.
3. Giving extra "think time" when asking for responses.
4. Checking for understanding - students explain what they have understood.
5. Encouraging students to ask for clarification.
6. Being Direct. Avoiding sarcasm, innuendo, ambiguity.
7. Explaining non-literal, figurative language and using accessible vocabulary.
8. Implementation of repetition and routines to decrease the load on working memory.
9. Emphasising and directing attention to key points.
10. Explicitly teach key vocabulary.

Appendix 2

Ryan's Fictional Story where he explores feelings and thoughts. (This has been used with Ryan's permission and includes excepts from various sections, not necessarily contiguous).

Theme: Longing for Love

1. *I was just sitting back drinking and having a good time when Julius want me to meet this girl, JT I want to meet Jasmine. Jasmine was about 5 foot 9 African-American with a very slender body and long curly black hair and a face that reminded me of a young Kerrie Washington. It's nice to meet you, you too I heard you were a virgin, yer pretty much, that's so cute… well today is your lucky day follow me, ok, as I was following this beautiful girl to the room I thanks Julius for setting me up with Jasmine when I got to the room with Jasmine she started to kiss me and undressing me she was very patient and took her time with me*.

2. *We arrived about 930-10 o'clock and I was just sitting back smoking and drinking when I saw her walk right by me she was so beautiful, yo Marcus who is that girl, which girl, the one sitting by the heater, what the brunette, yer her, oh that's Veronica, she's beautiful man you got to set me up with her, yeah no worries JT ill introduce you to her follow me. I follow Marcus to where Veronica was I was kinder nervous cos I liked her, yo Veronica what's up girl, Marcus I haven't seen you in forever give us a hug… oh who's your friend Marcus, oh Veronica I'd like you meet JT, JT meet Veronica. Veronica was incredibly stunning with long hair the colour of onyx, her skin was light golden like the sun. She was quite tall about 6ft but very slender, her face was that of classic beauty that seemed to be just like her personality. I then noticed her eyes they were as blue as the ocean, I tried to speak but just stumbled over my words I began to think how am I'm going to do this? That's when Veronica just casually asked me if I was having a good night, her words were like music to my ears. It all of a sudden made me feel so at ease and the conversation just started to flow. We talked about so many different things from the music we liked to the movies we watched. She told me about her childhood, while I was a little afraid to give that much away due to my past, because you all know how that goes. I just need Veronica to get to know me for the real me, not the criminal side! It seemed like time passed by talking to her I didn't even pay any attention to what was going on around us. It was about 130 in the morning when I finally asked her if she wanted to get out of here with me. Veronica do you want to get out of here and get something to eat, yeah JT let's get out of here but just let me say good bye to my friends first then I'll be right with you, ok I'll be with you in a minute I just got to see Marcus for a second. Yo Marcus, yeah JT, can you hold my 9mm for me, yeah but why, cos I'm leaving with Veronica and I don't want her to see it, understand brother pass it here, thanks Marcus I'll see you tomorrow.*

3. *Veronica was waiting at the door for me, have you been waiting long, no, Shall we go then? We walked downstairs and I walked her to her dodge charger. It was a nice glossy black. We started driving to McDonalds for a meal when we got there we just walk in and ordered a 2 ¼ pounder and a large coke. We went and got a seat in a booth while we waited for our food. Veronica how long you know Marcus for, since I was 9 or 10 after my parents died, but how long do you know Marcus for, about a month… I'm sorry for your parents I truly am. Thanks but I'm fine, Marcus has been like a second Dad to me. Did he adopt you or something like that? Yeah when I was 11 but I've known him basically all my life, I even lived with him after my parents died. I couldn't help but feel sorry for her cos I've been through some bad stuff in*

my life but it seemed insignificant compared to what she had been through.

4. *We sat there in the booth talking for about 15/20 minutes before we decided to leave to go to her place. We didn't talk much going back to her place all we really did was listen to music. When we got to her house I intended to end it with a kiss good night but she asked me in for coffee. Do you want to come in for some coffee, Yeah why not, we got out the car and started walking up to the door I was just thinking what a good night we had and how much I was falling in love with her but I didn't know if she felt the same way then Veronica open the door and I followed her in. I didn't even get 3 feet in the hallway when she kissed me. I was shocked but in a good way, what's wrong, nothing you just surprised me and I thought I was just coming in for coffee, no silly I want to take you to bed, really, yeah. We went back to kissing and she shut the door behind us while she took me to her bed and we started to rip off each other clothes. Veronica looked so sexy standing there naked it made me nervous but she grab my hand and led to her bed and when we got under the covers.*

5. *The next morning I was in a pretty good mood, Veronica was still asleep and I didn't want to wake her. I went to make breakfasts in bed for her to show how much loved her. So I snuck out of bed as quiet as a mouse and grabbed my boxers and looked for the kitchen and I found it I didn't know what Veronica liked and it was a pain in the ass just looking for the coffee. 15 min of struggling to make breakfast and it was done. I made my way to Veronica's bedroom with toast and drink in hand. Veronica was asleep when I came back so I went to the side of the bed and put the coffee under her nose to wake her up. Veronica woke up after inhaling the aroma of the coffee. Morning beautiful, hey, breakfast in bed? Yeah but what's this for? I wanted to show you how much I love you and appreciate the night I had with you. Veronica sat up in bed as I placed the breakfast tray over her lap, I thought you'd be gone by now she said happily sipping her coffee, I'm not one of those guys who heats up the sheets and leaves you I like to treat my girls like I want to be treated. Am I dreaming as she pinched herself on the arm to make sure she wasn't dreaming smiling with the fond memory of what happened the night before.*

6. *I got another phone call from veronica she was asking me where I was I told her I was 10 to 20 minutes away from Marcus shop and that I loved her an see her soon then I hung up. Who was that JT oh let me guess Veronica, yeah it was… she was just asking how far away we were, yeah what did you tell her? 10 to 20 so let's get a move on hey. Dwayne started car and pulled out the alleyway and drove down the street to Marcus shop. Sitting in the passenger side watching the buildings go by I was starting to get flashbacks of when I was a kid and of my Mum and Dad but I didn't know why. I guessed I must have missed them. JT what's up, huh? What were you thinking? Nothing man. We rocked up to Marcus place by 630pm. getting out the car I could feel the cold immediately it was bone chilling but when I saw Veronica I couldn't feel it any more the sight of her warmed me up. Hay Veronica sorry I'm late I got held up in traffic, that's ok I'm just happy to see you, congratulations on getting permanency at the hospital, thank you JT it means a lot to me to hear that from you, no worries… but what are we doing to night? Just going to a restaurant, who's coming with us? Marcus, Julius, and Dwayne of course and my friend Jane, ok but when are we all going? In about ½ hour, I'll have a shower then we'll get going*.

7. *I had a quick shower and put on some nice black jeans with a plain white shirt and a dark blue and white Jacket with the Detroit Lions football logo. I left the bathroom and went out the front of the shop where everyone was. I saw Veronica talking to Jane. Walking up to Veronica I couldn't help but notice how beautiful she looked in that red dress. You look*

stunning Veronica, thank you JT… you don't look bad yourself, I try to look as best as I can for you, oh JT before I forget this is my best friend Jane, it's a pleasure to meet you Jane, the same with you. Jane was short about 5 foot 7 and very curvy with shoulder length honey blonde hair and green eyes that were as dark as the rainforest. She was beautiful. Jane how long have you known Veronica for, ah… since I was 7 or 8 but how long have you to been dating for? That question put me on the spot and I had to think quickly. Ah… we've just starting seeing each other. As I put my arms around Veronica. She was as cold as ice to the touch. Veronica are you cold? On not really why though? Cos you're cold to the touch, I'm used to the weather and being cold, fair enough. I must have been speaking to Jane and Veronica for a long time cause by the time Julius pulled up in to the driveway of the shop in his black Chevrolet it must have been ten past seven by the time he got there. I put my head on Veronicas shoulders and started to drifted off to sleep as she stroked my head it reminded me of when I was a kid and mum used to take care of me when I was sick.

8. *Sitting in the back of the car I was getting flash backs again of my family but time it was my little brother which made me wonder what he was up to and how he was going. JT… JT, huh… what is it? We're here, cool. I gently stroked Veronica cheek. Veronica… Veronica, huh, we're home, ok. I got out the car first and then help Veronica out like a gentleman would and escorted her in to the house to her bed*.

9. *As I slept I kept having dreams that were more like nightmares about my family it was so insane and unreal that it scared the shit out of me. Yo JT wake up wake up, what? You were shaking in your sleep, really, yeah what were you dreaming of? Nothing it was only a bad dream… I'm fine now, My family I had a dream that they tortured me in front of my eyes and I couldn't do nothing to stop it from happening, fuckin' hell no wonder you didn't want to speak about it, yeah… can we go inside now it's cold out here, yeah sure thing lets go, we walked to the door to go inside, Dwayne don't tell anyone what I told you ok, yeah you got my word, thanks.*

Theme: Longing for the Outside

1. *In the establishment the ambience was very high class and exquisite. The tables were strategically placed to give the feel of warmth and caring of the customers dining experience. I saw where Veronica and the others were sitting at a table for 6 in the middle of the room. Me and Dwayne made our way to the table through the wave of coming and going waiters and customers who were seated eating there meals. The way they were looking at us made me feel uneasy but I still sat down and pretended to act normal. What did you speak to Dwayne about? Nothing he was just seeing how I was feeling, ok, so what are we eating? The waiters haven't come yet. We sat there talking for a while enjoying the atmosphere waiting for one of the waiters to serve us. Is this table ready to order? Yes we are, and what would the table like to order? Me and Veronica decided on the Puttanesca linguine, Dwayne said he'd have the osso bucco, Jane said she would have the veal parmigiana, melanzane parmigiana, Julius and Marcus ordered the Italian special. And would the table like something to drink as well? I ordered a double malt scotch, Veronica just water cos she had to go to work the next day and Jane had a bloody Mary while Dwayne, Julius and Marcus had Russian Vodka.*
2. *The food arrived 15 to 20 minute later it smelt delicious and looked it too. I sat there enjoying my food listening to Julius and Marcus tell embarrassing stories about each other. I remembered when Julius was little about 7 or 8, he got a hold of my car keys and went for a*

joy ride, yo Marcus how old were you at the time? I was about 17 but I was saying … arr where was I? You were at the part where Julius had stolen your car, thanks Veronica, your welcome.

Theme: Longing for Peace

1. *When Veronica was gone I went back inside and crashed out on the couch. The nightmares came back when I was sleep and this time they were worse. I was tied to a table in a dark room and my family was standing around me with knives in hand I tried to scream but I made no sound and then they started to stab and slash at me. I woke up swatting like crazy and breathing heavily. These nightmares were getting worse. I sat on the couch for a minute trying to put my head together before I went bathroom to freshen up.*

2. *Julius how old was the kid that died? He was 6, fuck'n hell… why do the innocent ones died… because of other people's action? I don't know JT. We arrived at Marcus shop at 11:30 and Marcus was walking up and down the drive way talking on the phone he didn't look himself. I got out the car and made my way to were Marcus was.*

3. *Facing the wall I could hear them laughing while they loaded the guns they took off us, and Julius praying and asking for forgiveness. I guessed he had some demons that he held inside but I guessed we all did. My thoughts were running all over the place and the only thing that kept me from breaking down was Veronica and how happy she made me.*

4. *The nightmares were coming back and worse'er than before and is time I was in the middle of a forest siting around a campfire just by myself in the dark. I'd been sitting around the fire for a while just enjoying the warm embrace of the flame listing to the wolves howl and one old owl hooting in a tree with the crackling from the fire I was quite relaxed. Then I heard something that broke the peace of the forest something that shouldn't have been there but I didn't know what it was and it left me with uneasy feeling then it went away.*

5. *I hated lying to Veronica but at the same time I had to protect her from what I do in my life and that was the hard part about it. If I did tell Veronica what I've done in Detroit since I've got here I might scare her off and if didn't tell her and she found out by some cruel chance she would leave as well. It was a conundrum. I landed in bed trying to think of how to tell Veronica about what had happened but I couldn't find a way to tell her. Lying was the only other choice I had but to get Julius on board with it.*

6. *Marcus when's the funeral for the kid and dad? On Friday… you coming? I'm not sure Marcus… I didn't even know them… so why would I go? To comfort and support the family of the deceased. Marcus had a point to what he was saying. Ok Marcus… I'll go then but can I stay at the back of the church, why? Cos I've never been to a funeral before.*

Improved Use of Language Skills

Coming around the corner all I could see was rundown old buildings, rusty barb-wire fences,

and the city skyscrapers in the distance. Dwayne pulled to the kerb, the snow was starting to melt leaving a dirty brown slippery hazard for us to make our way through. The atmosphere of the neighbourhood was bleak and poor, graffiti sprayed dull tenement buildings were a contrast to the shiny skyscrapers that stood out in the distance. It looked like no one lived here and many probably wished they didn't.