

# BEHIND THE GATES OF LEARNING: EXPLORING THE EDUCATIONAL EXPERIENCES OF TEACHERS AND CHILDREN IN CONFLICT WITH THE LAW IN MALAYSIAN REHABILITATION CENTRES

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**Abstract:** *Education plays a pivotal role in the rehabilitation and reintegration of Children in Conflict with the Law (CCL). In Malaysia, institutional rehabilitation centres are mandated to provide educational and vocational programmes aimed at restoring disrupted learning trajectories and fostering personal transformation. This qualitative thematic article examines the challenges, expectations, and reintegration pathways associated with educational provision for CCL, drawing on insights from teachers and former child offenders. Findings reveal systemic constraints related to resources, family support, stigma, employability, and self-resilience, while simultaneously highlighting education as a source of hope, moral reform, and future orientation. The article contributes to policy and practice by underscoring the need for coordinated post-release support, family engagement, and societal acceptance to sustain rehabilitation outcomes.*

**Key words:** *Children in conflict with the law (CCL); educational experiences; institutional rehabilitation centres; rehabilitation and reintegration*

## Introduction

Children in Conflict with the Law (CCL) represent a vulnerable population whose developmental trajectories are often disrupted by socio-economic disadvantage, family instability, and limited access to education. Internationally, education is recognised as a core component of juvenile justice systems, functioning not only as a mechanism for knowledge acquisition but also as a rehabilitative tool that promotes moral development, self-efficacy, and social reintegration (UNICEF, 2019). In Malaysia, rehabilitation centres operate within a welfare-oriented juvenile justice framework that emphasises care, protection, and reform rather than punishment.

This article explores how educational provision is experienced and implemented within Malaysian rehabilitation centres for CCL. Specifically, it examines the challenges encountered by teachers and CCL, the expectations held by both groups, and the broader implications for reintegration into society. By adopting a qualitative thematic approach, the study seeks to provide empirically grounded insights to inform education policy, rehabilitation practice, and community-based support systems.

## Literature Review

### Children in Conflict with the Law (CCL) in Malaysia

The rising incidence of youth crime and the increasing number of young people involved in the juvenile justice system have challenged established beliefs that guide policies and practices concerning young offenders (Nazirah Hassan, 2020).

In Malaysia, rehabilitation centres for CCL are fully managed by the government through two main departments. Asrama Akhlak and Tunas Bakti Schools operate under the Department of Social Welfare, while Henry Gurney Schools and Integrity Schools fall under the jurisdiction of the Malaysian Prisons Department (Nazirah H. & Daniella M., 2018; Taib, RM, 2023, 2024; Noor Aziah M. A. et al., 2023).

The term *Children in Conflict with the Law* in Malaysia refers to individuals aged between 15 and 21 who are detained or imprisoned for criminal offences (Prison Act, 2008). These individuals are typically placed in Henry Gurney Schools or Integrity Schools under the Malaysian Prisons Department.

Malaysia's approach to youth offending emphasises rehabilitation and education rather than punitive measures alone. Young offenders are provided with opportunities to develop vocational, academic, and personal skills to facilitate successful reintegration into society.

Currently, there are nine Integrity Schools and three Henry Gurney Schools managed by the Malaysian Prisons Department. The Integrity Schools include Sungai Petani, Marang, Bentong, Puncak Alam, Muar, Kluang, Kuching, Kota Kinabalu (W), and Kota Kinabalu. The three Henry Gurney Schools are Henry Gurney School Telok Mas (Melaka), Henry Gurney School Puncak Borneo (Sarawak), and Henry Gurney School Keningau (Sabah).

### Education and Juvenile Rehabilitation

The role of education in juvenile rehabilitation has been widely documented in criminological and educational literature. Educational engagement is associated with reduced recidivism, improved self-regulation, and enhanced employability among youth offenders (Abrams &

Snyder, 2010; Davis et al., 2013). Educational programming is a critical component of correctional interventions, particularly as many young offenders have experienced repeated academic failure before institutionalisation (Bell, 2017).

Beyond academic attainment, education within rehabilitation settings serves as a platform for identity reconstruction and future orientation, enabling young people to envision lawful and productive lives.

Education through formal schooling is a crucial element in national development across economic, political, and social domains. Accordingly, education is positioned as a key component of rehabilitation programmes for young prisoners in Malaysia (Malaysian Prisons Department, n.d.). Noor Aziah M. A. et al. (2023) identify five levels of academic education offered within rehabilitation institutions: 3M classes (reading, writing, counting), Pre-PMR, PMR, Pre-SPM, and SPM classes.

Rehabilitation theory is widely regarded as the most suitable approach for child offenders, as it focuses on individual reform through education, social integration, and the elimination of criminal mindsets (Taib, 2011, 2012, 2013, 2023, 2024; Mohd Al Adib Samuri et al., 2013).

### **Malaysian Policy Framework**

In Malaysia, the treatment of CCL is primarily governed by the Child Act 2001, which incorporates principles of rehabilitation, the best interests of the child, and social reintegration. Rehabilitation institutions under the Social Welfare Department are mandated to provide formal education, religious and moral instruction, and vocational training. National education policies further emphasise inclusivity and lifelong learning, aligning with international commitments such as the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child.

Despite these policy commitments, gaps remain between policy intent and implementation, particularly in relation to resource allocation, accreditation of skills, and post-release support. Institutional stakeholders have expressed concern that former CCL often face stigma and rejection from society upon release, increasing their vulnerability to recidivism (Taib, 2012, 2013, 2014, 2016, 2018).

### **Methodology**

This article adopts a qualitative research design grounded in thematic analysis. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews with teachers serving in Malaysian rehabilitation centres and children in conflict with the law (CCL) residing in these institutions. Participants were selected based on their direct involvement in educational programmes. Interviews focused on experiences of educational provision, perceived challenges, reintegration expectations, and personal aspirations. All interviews were transcribed verbatim and analysed thematically to identify recurring patterns and salient themes. Ethical considerations, including informed consent, confidentiality, and sensitivity to participants' vulnerability, were strictly observed. Although research involving CCL and institutional teachers is inherently complex and sensitive (Nazirah, 2016), the authors consistently prioritised the best interests of all parties throughout the research process.

### Findings and Discussion: Teachers' Perspectives

Teachers reported that most children in conflict with the law (CCL) demonstrate commendable attitudes toward learning, showing genuine interest and willingness to participate in academic, religious, and skills-based programmes. In addition, the majority of the children display sincere and sustained efforts to remain actively engaged in learning activities (Taib, 2011, 2012, 2013, 2014, 2019). Through various educational provisions targeted at former child offenders, the Malaysian Prisons Department is committed to supporting these children both during their period of incarceration and after release, particularly in fostering their ability to reflect on and acknowledge their past offences (Taib, 2019).

Despite these positive dispositions, several challenges continue to undermine the effectiveness of educational provision within rehabilitation institutions (Taib, 2025). Key constraints include shortages of qualified teaching staff and counsellors, limited access to learning resources, and inadequate counselling support.

Teachers further highlighted the detrimental impact of weak family involvement, persistent social stigma, and limited employment opportunities on students' motivation and long-term outcomes. These findings are consistent with existing research that emphasises the structural vulnerabilities inherent in institutional education for juvenile offenders.

Empirical studies indicate that former offenders frequently face multiple reintegration challenges, including family acceptance, spousal support, access to employment, avoidance of negative peer influence, abstinence from substance abuse, and maintenance of physical and mental health. When these issues are managed effectively, the likelihood of reoffending is significantly reduced (Mohd Alif Jasni et al., 2022; Taib, 2023, 2024).

Family support appears to be associated with prosocial re-entry outcomes, not because of emotional or interactional bonds alone, but primarily because families provide for the basic needs of returning individuals. Instrumental forms of familial support, such as housing and financial assistance, have been found to be more influential in promoting prosocial re-entry than emotional support alone (Mowen et al., 2018).

Although employment is a critical factor in successful reintegration, former offenders often encounter reluctance from potential employers due to their criminal records. This stigma may compel some individuals to engage in illicit activities to meet basic living needs, thereby increasing the risk of recidivism (Mohd Alif Jasni et al., 2019; Taib, 2023, 2024). In response, the Malaysian government has been urged to initiate programmes aimed at recruiting and employing former offenders. Access to education remains particularly vital in empowering youth, including young prisoners, by equipping them with the skills and knowledge necessary for post-release success (Mohd Asri Mohd Noor & Kesavan Nallaluthan, 2013).

Overall, public attitudes toward offenders tend to be negative and are often accompanied by a high level of acceptance of offender-related myths (Bariani, 2016). As noted by Jal Zabidi et al. (2018), communities and the pervasive influence of social media frequently compromise the privacy and best interests of children, whether as victims or offenders. Crimes involving children are often publicised without due consideration of the potential harm caused by such exposure.

### Findings and Discussion: Children's Perspectives

From the perspective of children in conflict with the law (CCL), education within rehabilitation centres is perceived as a second chance to reclaim disrupted futures. Many participants expressed gratitude for the opportunity to acquire knowledge and practical skills. Nevertheless, internal anxieties concerning self-readiness, societal acceptance, and financial independence persist.

Concerns related to family rejection, employer stigma, and the non-accredited status of vocational skills further contribute to uncertainty surrounding reintegration. These findings underscore the psychological dimension of rehabilitation, in which personal transformation must be supported by external validation and the availability of meaningful opportunities.

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Discrimination and stigma remain among the primary factors that hinder former prisoners from reintegrating effectively following their release. Such experiences often result in marginalisation and social exclusion, particularly when individuals attempt to return to their original communities. This rejection can impede smooth reintegration and may increase the likelihood of re-engagement in criminal activities (Mohd Alif Jasni et al., 2019).

Ongoing efforts to enhance educational opportunities for young inmates are believed to play a significant role in facilitating successful reintegration into society after release (Storey & Jawing, 2024). It is also important to recognise that prisoners demonstrate greater resilience when they maintain positive future-oriented thinking and receive love and support from family members and friends (Nashori et al., 2024). However, the physical and social environments of some young offenders may expose them to the learning and normalisation of criminal behaviour, often through close friends or family members (Kratcosky & Kratcosky, 2020).

### Expectations and Hopes for Reintegration

Teachers expect children in conflict with the law (CCL) to sustain personal resilience, acknowledge past mistakes, and commit to lawful and socially responsible living. They emphasise the importance of supportive family structures, inclusive communities, and equitable employment practices in facilitating successful reintegration.

Similarly, CCL expresses hope that their educational achievements will lead to stable employment, restored family relationships, and broader social acceptance.

Both teachers and CCL converge on the view that rehabilitation should represent a meaningful turning point rather than a permanent label, thereby underscoring the moral and social significance of second chances.

Robinson and Crow (2009), drawing on prior literature, identify several key issues related to reoffending and rehabilitation among former offenders. First, offenders possess diverse criminogenic needs, making it essential to address a comprehensive range of interventions rather than focusing on isolated factors. Second, effective rehabilitation extends beyond the



provision of practical support by professionals and requires sustained efforts to enhance offenders' motivation and personal capacities. Third, it is necessary to address not only individual needs but also the conditions of the communities to which offenders return, particularly when these communities are deprived, disadvantaged, or insufficiently equipped to support reintegration.

Family rejection has been shown to significantly influence former prisoners, often pushing them back toward previous lifestyles and increasing the likelihood of re-arrest and re-incarceration (Mohd Alif Jasni et al., 2022; Taib, 2023, 2024).

Employment constitutes another critical component of the reintegration process for former offenders. Stable and meaningful employment plays a pivotal role in reducing recidivism, as many individuals are at greater risk of relapse when they are unable to secure adequate work opportunities (Siti Maziah et al., 2018).

William and Schaefer (2018) conclude that desistance strategies mediate the relationship between ex-offenders' motivation to desist from crime and the structural conditions they encounter during the reintegration phase. Furthermore, even minimal engagement with educational activities during incarceration may indicate the presence of resilience factors, which can significantly contribute to sustained desistance from crime following release (Paszti, 2020).

### **Implications for Policy and Practice**

The findings indicate that educational provision alone is insufficient to ensure successful reintegration for children in conflict with the law (CCL). Policy efforts should therefore prioritise strengthening educational resources within rehabilitation institutions, accrediting vocational and skills-based programmes, enhancing family engagement initiatives, and fostering sustainable partnerships with employers. Community sensitisation programmes are also essential to reduce social stigma and promote inclusive attitudes toward former CCL.

### **Conclusion**

This study reinforces the central role of education in the rehabilitation of children in conflict with the law in Malaysia. While institutional programmes provide critical foundations for behavioural and cognitive change, sustained reintegration depends on holistic support that encompasses family, community, and employment sectors. Former CCL should be recognised as individuals capable of growth and renewal rather than being permanently defined by past transgressions. Ultimately, education serves not merely as a tool for institutional compliance but as a pathway toward dignity, personal agency, and social belonging.

By enhancing public awareness, fostering societal acceptance, and improving access to educational and employment resources, Malaysia can further reduce recidivism and move toward a more inclusive and supportive environment for former youth offenders.

Despite the challenges highlighted in this study, there remains a need for systematic and rigorous empirical research to examine the extent to which the difficulties encountered by former child offenders, particularly those who experience re-arrest and re-incarceration, stem from similar adverse experiences identified in existing literature.

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