



## THE NEEDS DEFICIT OF PRE-RELEASE JUVENILE OFFENDERS TO BE RE-INTEGRATED INTO THE EDUCATIONAL SYSTEM



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### ABSTRACT

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This paper discusses the needs deficit of pre-release juvenile offenders from the educational perspectives, which might complicate their chances for successful re-integration after release. This qualitative study involved a total of 17 pre-release juvenile offenders who have been selected using the purposive sampling technique from three correctional institutions in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. Data were gathered through in-depth interviews and analysed using content analysis technique. The study findings have indicated that many of the respondents have major concerns about their history of disciplinary problems, for being dropped-out from schools, and having low academic abilities, which they perceived as primary hindrances for them to be re-enroll in schools due to stigma, discrimination and rejection from the authorities. Some respondents believed they might face struggle in the learning process even if they get re-enrolled because the need to catch up with the syllabus that they have missed since they have been out of school for quite some time. These deficits become major challenges for them to acquire better education and qualification, hence it can affect their opportunity for a more stable job in the long run. This paper also discusses several intervention strategies to improve the access, quality and implementation of academic programme and to strengthen the re-integration support through close collaboration, partnership and commitment from the Ministry of Women, Family and Community Development (MWFCDD); the Department of Social Welfare (DSW); Ministry of Education (MOE) and other relevant stakeholders in assisting these juvenile offenders in meeting with their educational needs, which all these are in line with the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) and National Child Policy.

**Contribution/ Originality:** This paper documents the educational needs deficit of pre-release juvenile offenders that have a significant implications, particularly in Malaysia which can guide the MWFCDD, DSW and other stakeholders in improving the academic programme and the re-integration support so that the juveniles can re-integrate into the educational system successfully.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

In Malaysia, a total of 1,279 of juvenile offenders were placed in correctional institutions under the Ministry of Women, Family and Community Development (MWFCDD) and Department of Social Welfare (DSW) in 2014 due to their status offenses and / or illegal behaviours such as crime and drug abuse (Department of Social Welfare, 2014). Although, the official statistics of released juvenile offenders have not been recorded and / or published openly in Malaysia, the government, particularly through the MWFCDD and DSW will surely have to deal with the issues of re-integration of this population into the communities. It is believed that there are massive numbers of juvenile offenders in correctional institutions that need to be re-integrated into the educational system based on their developmental stage.

However, Abrams *et al.* (2008) found that many of the juvenile offenders struggle to successfully accomplish their development goals, particularly related to education after release from the juvenile system. Findings from previous studies have shown that only a small percentage from their sample of incarcerated juvenile offenders were enrolled in school after release from correctional facilities (Foley, 2001; Bullis and Yovanoff, 2002). For instance, Bullis and Yovanoff (2004) reported that only 12 percent from their sample of 759 formerly incarcerated youth completed a high school or a General Equivalency Diploma (GED) upon release into the community.

Juvenile offenders who are returning into communities from correctional institutions face uncertain futures as they attempt to re-integrate themselves into the mainstream educational systems due to numerous academic deficiencies or other challenges, including learning disabilities such as low skill levels in reading and writing, poor academic performance, inadequate education, resistance from the school system, disciplinary problems, school discipline policies such as zero tolerance resulted in suspension and expulsions; drop-out of school, incomplete or missing record and etc. (Foley, 2001; Bullis and Yovanoff, 2002; Altschuler and Brash, 2004; Mears and Travis, 2004; Agnew, 2005; Osgood *et al.*, 2005; Snyder and Sickmund, 2006; Leone and Weinberg, 2010; Gonsoulin and Read, 2011).

Previous studies indicate that juveniles' unmet educational needs and their unsuccessful re-integration into the educational system often have a long-term negative impact on their lives which make them more vulnerable for further failures in securing employment which often resulting in economic and social hardship such as poverty, homelessness and recidivism into the juvenile and adult justice systems during their transition from adolescence to adulthood (Coalition for Juvenile Justice, 2001; Altschuler and Brash, 2004; Spencer and Jones-Walker, 2004; Agnew, 2005; Osgood *et al.*, 2005; Snyder and Sickmund, 2006; Lapan *et al.*, 2007; Simoes *et al.*, 2008; Lee and Villagrana, 2015)

Since education has profound implications on the juveniles' future and determining the risk of their recidivism, therefore, it is imperative for the juvenile justice systems to improve the re-integration supports and educational programming in the institutions since the previous studies found that juvenile offenders received low quality education and lack of re-integration supports during their confinement and transition into the community (Yohalem and Pittman, 2001; Matvya *et al.*, 2006; Mazzotti and Higgins, 2006; Nellis and Wayman, 2009; Blomberg *et al.*, 2011).

Due to the fact that the re-integration of juvenile offenders into the educational system is a critical issue, but not well researched in Malaysia which contributed to the absence of knowledge about the transition needs of returning juvenile offenders, this study aimed to fill the research gaps by examine the needs deficit of pre-release juvenile offenders from the educational perspectives that might complicate their chances for successful re-integration into the educational system after release so that appropriate interventions can be proposed to assist the juvenile offenders in meeting with their educational needs.

### 1.1. Study Objective

By focusing on the pre-release juvenile offenders, specifically, this study aimed to examine their educational

goals / plans in short and / or long-range, the prior risk factors, their deficiencies and anticipated challenges in meeting with their educational needs. This study also assesses the accessibility, quality and effectiveness of existing academic programme and the re-integration support provided to the juveniles during their institutional placement and transition into the communities. The findings of this study are then used to propose more appropriate and effective interventions in order to effectively fulfill the educational needs of this population, which further increase their chances to re-integrate into the educational system successfully.

## 2. METHODOLOGY

A qualitative study was conducted on pre-release juvenile offenders from two Probation Hostels (IA and IC) and one Approved School (IB) located in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. A purposive sampling was chosen and 17 respondents who were within three months from release and able to speak in Malay or English language participated in the study. Data for the study were also gathered through in-depth interviews with eight informants, which are warden, deputy warden and probation officers from the three institutions.

The semi-structured in-depth interviews were employed to gain deeper insight from the respondents regarding the needs, challenges and issues they might face in re-integrating into the mainstream educational system after their release from correctional institutions into the communities. While the data from the informants can add depth and provide greater insight on the academic programme and re-integration support provided during their institutional placement and transition into the communities. The interviews took approximately 60-90 minutes to complete. All the data were analysed manually by researcher using content analysis.

Prior the interviews, the researcher gave informed consent forms and explained to the respondents about the voluntary nature of their participation and the opportunity to withdraw at any point within the study. All of the respondents who are willing to participate in this study signed and returned the form to the researcher. The researcher also emphasized on the confidentiality issue by ensuring the respondents that their personal information such as real names and their answers to the interview questions will be protected and kept confidential.

## 3. RESULTS

### 3.1. Short / Long-Range Educational Goals / Plans:

As displayed in Table 1, overall 52.94% (9/17) respondents in three institutions planned to re-enroll in secondary schools immediately after release from the institutions. While 47.06% (8/17) respondents reported an immediate plan to register and sit for the Malaysian Certificate of Education (MCE) as a private candidate after leaving the institutions. Only 23.53% (4/17) of the respondents reportedly wish to pursue higher education as their long-range goals.

### 3.2. Challenges / Deficiencies:

Despite of their desire to achieve their educational goals as mentioned above, many respondents who have deficiencies perceived the possibility of facing tough challenges which make them doubt their ability in reaching their goals successfully.

**History of disciplinary problems.** As displayed in Table 1, a total of 76.47% (13/17) respondents in all three institutions who had been suspended and expelled from elementary or secondary school in the past because of their misbehavior such as truancy, bully and etc. reported feeling worried if District Education Office and / or school authorities refuse to accept their admission due to their disciplinary problems.

**Lagging behind the academic syllabus.** As Table 1 displays, overall, 82.35% (14/17) respondents from the three institutions who have been out of school for a certain time because of being dropped-out or expelled from school perceived the difficulties in the learning process. In fact, the challenges might be even harder for those who planned to sit for the MCE as a private candidate. The respondents believe they will struggle to catch up with the

syllabus that they have missed.

**Low academic abilities.** Table 1 also indicated that 41.18% (7/17) of respondents in the three institutions believed their low academic abilities might challenge them in the learning process which will resulting in failure to gain a good result in public examination (either in school or as a private candidate for MCE) and further reduce their chance to successfully reaching their long-range goal to pursue higher education.

**Table-1.** Educational Needs Deficit

Educational Needs Deficit	IA		IB		IC		Total	
	(n:8)	%	(n:5)	%	(n:4)	%	(n:17)	%
<b>Goals / Plans</b>								
<b>Short Range</b>								
Re-enroll in secondary school	6	75	0	0	3	75	9	52.94
Register and sit for Malaysian Certificate of Education (MCE) as a private candidate	2	25	5	100	1	25	8	47.06
<b>Long Range</b>								
Pursue higher education	3	37.5	1	20	0	0	4	23.53
<b>Challenges / Deficiencies</b>								
Lagging behind the academic syllabus	6	75	5	100	3	75	14	82.35
History of disciplinary problem	7	87.5	3	60	3	75	13	76.47
Low academic abilities	2	25	3	60	2	50	7	41.18

#### 4. DISCUSSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

Overall, the respondents of this study reported their intentions to re-enroll in secondary schools or register and sit for the MCE as a private candidate upon their release from the institutions. Some of them wish to pursue higher education as their long-range goals. Despite their expressed intentions, most of the respondents reportedly feeling uncertain and doubt their ability because of their deficiencies that might challenge them in reaching their educational goal.

The study found that majority of the respondents who have the history of suspension or expulsion during elementary or secondary school in the past due to their disciplinary problems, including truancy, bully and other discipline history, afraid if the authorities such as District Education Office and / or school reject their admission and thus resulting in the failure to be successfully re-enrolled in school after release. In fact, the institutional staff who have been interviewed admit that no initiative will be taken to register the juveniles who have been expelled from school prior their placement in the correctional institution because of the high probability of being rejected by the authorities. [Seigle et al. \(2014\)](#) and [Sullivan \(2004\)](#) confirmed the resistance of the school to accept the juveniles due to their previous disciplinary problems is one of the barriers for school re-entry.

[Nellis and Wayman \(2009\)](#) reported that some schools deny the re-enrollment of former juveniles because they are hard to be managed. The school system reluctant to accept the ex-juveniles because of the stigma that their disruptive behavior will return ([Farkas et al., 2003](#)). However, the study findings have also revealed that even if the respondents managed to get re-enrolled into the secondary school, other problems may arise due to their academic lacking. Based on their previous academic failure throughout their school years in the past, many respondents who have been lagging behind the academic syllabus and have low academic abilities believe that they might face major challenges that diminish their chance to successfully pursuing their educational aims either in short and / or long-range. The respondents who wish to re-engage in secondary schools upon release worried if the learning process will be too hard for them.

In fact, some of them expressed the possibility to quit their schooling if they find themselves overwhelmed with the academic challenges. While, those who planned to register and sit for the MCE as a private candidate believe they will face even greater challenges. The respondents perceived the struggle to catch up with the academic

syllabus that they have missed. Hence, many respondents reportedly doubt their own ability to successfully reaching their long-range educational goal to pursue higher education since it relies on their academic attainment. This finding is consistent with the sample of [Abrams and Fields \(2008\)](#) as well as [Fields and Abrams \(2010\)](#) who are reported feeling worried because they anticipated that their academic weaknesses and learning problems would prevent them in reaching their educational goals to successfully complete their high school diploma or GED programme or pursue higher education upon re-entry. [Siegel et al. \(2006\)](#) reported that the frequent experiences of the academic failure decrease the students' self-esteem because of the feeling of inadequacy and the fear of repeated failure. According to Needs Theory by Maslow, poor academic or learning difficulties hinder individuals from fulfilling their psychological needs of mastery, competence, achievement and confidence which resulting in lack of self-esteem and the feeling helplessness that prevent them from achieving self-actualization needs ([Maslow, 1970](#); [Zastrow and Kirst-Ashman, 2007](#)).

The study somehow found that part of these deficiencies that might pose as challenges for respondents to be re-integrated into the educational system resulted from the inadequacy of current academic services provided in the correctional institutions in term of access, quality and implementation that failed to address these deficits while they are incarcerated. This is because most of the respondents reportedly did not engage in formal schooling outside the institution. The probation officers interviewed as informants said that the initiative to register the juveniles into school only made if they are still in school prior their placement in the institution, while there is no initiative to re-engage the juveniles who are no longer in school before entering the institutions. However, there are cases where the juveniles who are still in school prior their admission, unable to continue their schooling during their correctional placement because of the difficulties to register them in the middle of the academic session, which is obviously contradicted with the obligations of government to the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) that recognizes the juvenile's right to access community schools outside the institution.

Even though some of the juveniles who are not enrolled in formal schooling, particularly those who are illiterate engaged in the "Kelas Intervensi Awal Membaca dan Menulis (KIA 2M)", the study found that the basic instruction in reading and writing provided in the class could not adequately fulfill the learning needs of the juveniles. This is because some of the respondents who participated in the class reported that they still could not read and write. The study found that the instruction in "KIA 2M" class is taught by the probation officers who are unable to run the classes effectively due to their lacking in adequate training and heavy workloads. While some respondents who enrolled in formal school outside the institution reportedly facing struggle to catch up the academic curriculum and not provided with any extra classes in the institution. This finding is consistent with the [Child Rights Coalition Malaysia \(2012\)](#) which reported that the provision of education and re-integration support for children detained in DSW facilities are limited in term of availability, quality and structure, therefore need to be strengthened.

[Chung et al. \(2007\)](#) as well as [Mazzotti and Higgins \(2006\)](#) found that the academic programme in the juvenile justice system failed to adequately educate and prepare the juveniles for their successful return into the community school. While, [Altschuler and Brash \(2004\)](#) reported that the youth placed in the correctional facilities struggle to re-integrating into the mainstream educational system due to the failure of the institution to address their academic needs during incarceration and the lack of transitional support. In fact, [Klehr \(2009\)](#) found that the justice system itself might cause or exacerbate academic problems among the juveniles since they lose their valuable time that should be spent in school and the academic instruction they received in juvenile facilities is often of low quality, which make their returning to school difficult.

Given these inadequate learning and teaching support within the correctional institution that could not effectively meeting the educational needs of juvenile offenders, which will then affect their chances for successful re-integration into the mainstream educational system upon their release, it is highly suggested that the MWFC and DSW to work very closely with the Ministry of Education (MOE) and other relevant stakeholders.

It is hoped that this collaborative effort between the juvenile justice system and the MOE can enhance the academic wellness and educational success of juvenile offenders, for example, through the support of academic cadre to provide instruction in “KIA 2M” class and tuition to the schooling juveniles as well as the MOE monitoring of academic curriculum inside the institutions, the provision of teaching and reading materials such as books and etc. [Mincey et al. \(2008\)](#) highlight that strong academic services provided to the juveniles during their incarceration are paramount to facilitate a successful re-integration into school.

Furthermore, the close collaboration, partnership and commitment from all of these stakeholders are imperative to ease the school placement procedures so that the juveniles could be quickly re-engage in mainstream schools, while in correctional institution as well as upon their release into the communities regardless of their background or status. [Gonsoulin and Read \(2011\)](#) also emphasized on the interagency collaboration to expeditiously re-enroll juvenile offenders into mainstream school settings. School-age juveniles have the right to attend school during their placement in the institution despite of have been disconnected from schools due to suspension or dropped-out. Initiative should be made to re-engage them in the school during their institutional placement. This effort is significant to fulfill our commitment to the National Child Policy and the CRC, which recognise the educational right of children in conflict with the law to access the community schools outside the institution as well as their development and re-integration to help them reach their potential.

In addition to the close collaboration and partnership between the MWFC, DSW and MOE to improve the access, quality and implementation of academic programme, the government should strengthen the re-integration supports in the Malaysian juvenile justice system through the co-ordinated efforts of the probation officers in order to facilitate the successful re-integration of the juveniles into the mainstream educational system upon their release from the institutions. Both probation officers in institutional setting and the district where the juvenile lives should work very closely and committed in developing written re-integration plans and provide the returning juveniles with structural support, for instance, assist them with the arrangement of their enrollment in school or other academic programme in the community to ensure a seamless transition from the institutional setting into the mainstream educational system. [Mears and Travis \(2004\)](#) also emphasize on the importance to link the returning / released juvenile offenders to immediate educational placements that foster smooth transition and improve their outcomes. The planned and timely transitioning of juveniles into appropriate educational programme upon release from a correctional facility increase the likelihood of successful re-integration ([Leone and Weinberg, 2012](#)).

## 5. CONCLUSION

This study found that the re-integration into the educational system seems to be challenging for most of the respondents due to their deficits either in academic and / or disciplinary issues which causing them to have low self-esteem and doubt their own ability to successfully reaching their educational goals after release. This findings somehow indicate that the current practice in juvenile correctional institutions unable to address the educational needs of the juveniles during their placement which might reduce their chances to successfully re-integrated into the school or other academic programme in the community. In fact, it is found that part of these deficiencies were exacerbated by the lack of re-integration supports and inadequate education in juvenile placement due to lack of resources of co-ordination which affects the access, quality and implementation of academic programme both within juvenile correctional facilities and in the community.

Therefore, it is imperative for the juvenile justice systems to give critical attention on the improvement the re-integration supports and educational practice in the institutions through the close collaboration and co-ordinated supports from the MWFC, the DSW, MOE and probation officers in order to respond effectively to the educational needs of these juveniles, and further facilitate their educational success which will then enhance their future prospects, such as opportunity for a more stable job in the long run. This is because [Gonsoulin and Read \(2011\)](#) found that shared and co-ordinated responsibility across all agencies can increase the educational wellness



and well-being of the ex-juvenile offenders. Stephens and Arnette (2000) mentioned that effective transitional strategies could increase the likelihood of reenrollment in school, graduation from high school, successful employment and independent living among the juveniles. Findings from previous studies reported that former juveniles who are reenrolled and performing well in schools are less likely to reoffend and more likely to success in college and careers and thus have better economic stability in the future (Nellis and Wayman, 2009; Seigle *et al.*, 2014).

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