

Understanding the Challenges of Reinventing and Reintegrating Juvenile Offenders into Society through Rehabilitation in Chinese Special Schools

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Abstract

Juvenile delinquency is one of the common phenomena in China, and the history of rehabilitating delinquents is documented in various policies aiming to reshape individuals to be reintegrated into society. Through the implementation of the Juvenile Protection Law and Juvenile Delinquency Prevention Law in China, special schools are established across provinces to help these individuals through rehabilitation processes that are made available. Despite the increasingly humane approach being implemented to replace the “rehabilitation through labour” policy in the past, punishments still occur in existing special schools as a means to reform these juveniles. With the aim of exploring the challenges of ensuring proper and quality rehabilitation in special schools for the reinvention and reintegration of these juveniles, a qualitative exploratory research design is utilised to understand the current rehabilitation experiences. Existing teachers and students from a special school in a selected special school are recruited to achieve the research aims, specifically through interview sessions and observation sessions alongside documentation via note-taking. Findings revealed several normalised practices that are considered problematic in ensuring effective rehabilitation. This paper further informs and recommends future research practices for interested scholars.

Keywords: Juvenile Offenders, Social Rehabilitation, Social Reintegration, Social Reinvention

Introduction

The occurrence of juvenile offenders is a common phenomenon across various schools in different countries. Different measures are constantly implemented, revised, and re-implemented to ensure successful rehabilitation (Ahmady et al., 2020; Bahr et al., 2005; Li & Su, 2020; Souverein et al., 2022). In essence, rehabilitating juveniles is the primary motive in many education ministries, typically to foster societal values and shape the youth into better citizens (Ahmady et al., 2020; Bahr et al., 2005; Li & Su, 2020; Souverein et al., 2022; Yang &

Lei, 2019; Zhang & Yao, 2023). This research thus sheds light on understanding the challenges of successful rehabilitation in special schools in China. Studying the challenges of successful rehabilitation for juvenile offenders is necessary due to the scarcity of literature on juvenile rehabilitation, especially in the Chinese context. While there is a long history of the Chinese justice system and the establishment of correctional institutions for offenders, there remains a disconnected reality between the existing system and the actual implementation of the rehabilitation procedure (Yang & Lei, 2019; Zhang & Yao, 2023). The literature available often suggests an outdated rehabilitation system for juvenile offenders, but the suggestion is based on the amount of adequate support and resources available (Yang & Lei, 2019; Zhang & Yao, 2023).

At the same time, several pieces of literature suggest the extremely rigid structure implemented in the rehabilitation programmes offered in schools (Ahmady et al., 2020; Souverein et al., 2022; Tomita & Panzaru, 2010; Zhang & Yao, 2023). The culture of maintaining high discipline remains widely practiced in contemporary Chinese society (Li & Su, 2020; Yang & Lei, 2019; Zhang & Yao, 2023). Punishments are a frequently used method for offenders to bear the consequences of their actions, reprimanding them so as not to repeat their offences (Yang & Lei, 2019). Across centuries and over the past few years, the notion of believing people can be corrected and behave better in society reflects the Chinese community's social values. Despite the existence of the Juvenile Protection Law and Juvenile Delinquency Prevention Law in China this research was still necessary to inform the rehabilitation processes that occurred, thereby benefiting several parties to ensure successful rehabilitation for the juvenile offenders (Li & Su, 2020; Yang & Lei, 2019; Zhang & Yao, 2023). Firstly, the literature on rehabilitating offenders in the Chinese context can be strengthened and enriched based on the present research findings. The specific experiences of rehabilitating juvenile offenders can provide the latest results to existing and already available findings from similar research conducted (Li & Su, 2020; Yang & Zhao, 2021). Secondly, the Chinese Ministry of Education can take action to revise the rehabilitation procedures by involving more experts to strengthen the rehabilitation programmes (Liu & Sun, 2024; Yang & Zhao, 2021; Yang & Lei, 2019; Zhang & Yao, 2023). The challenges identified in the present research can receive the necessary acknowledgement, and suitable suggestions and recommendations can be provided to overcome the challenges. Through the potential suggestions and recommendations, teachers and the juvenile offenders in special schools can experience positive changes (Yang & Lei, 2019). This is even more evident for the juvenile offenders, who are students in special schools, to receive quality rehabilitation and guidance towards developing better qualities to live in contemporary Chinese society (Liu & Sun, 2024; Messner et al., 2018).

Drawing from the lack of literature and suggestions of poor implementation of the rehabilitation system in China for juvenile offenders, this research sought to explore the challenges Chinese Special Schools faced while reinventing and rehabilitating juvenile offenders to be reintegrated into Chinese society (Liu & Sun, 2024; Zhang & Yao, 2023).

Rehabilitation, Reinvention, and Reintegration of Juvenile Offenders

The term "juvenile" refers to a group of young people still receiving education and not legally considered adults (Ahmady et al., 2020; Bahr et al., 2005; Souverein et al., 2022). In the Chinese context, this term refers to any child who is still receiving education at the primary

or secondary levels. However, various factors, such as family background, social environment, social media influence, and peer pressure, may lead juveniles to show behaviours that may be considered problematic. Such behaviours may affect others when they are not intervened and helped, especially in school settings where the juveniles interact with others (Bahr et al., 2005; Li & Su, 2020; Souverein et al., 2022; Yang & Zhao, 2021).

Delinquency comes into play when juveniles' actions become uncomfortable to others, often regarded as having disciplinary issues with complying with school rules and policies (Ahmady et al., 2020; Bahr et al., 2005; Messner et al., 2018; Souverein et al., 2022; Yang & Zhao, 2021). While counselling services are available across schools in China, some schools may find certain students too much to handle after repeating multiple offences or breaking the rules (Liu & Sun, 2024; Yang & Zhao, 2021; Yang & Lei, 2019). Transferring students to special schools is applicable when counselling services cease to provide help due to their inability to guide the students (Ahmady et al., 2020; Souverein et al., 2022; Tomita & Panzaru, 2010). Parents are informed through the school's notice, and the transferring procedures are conducted following the local education ministry's approval (Liu & Sun, 2024; Yang & Zhao, 2021).

Due to these offences, these juveniles are regarded as delinquents who are also recognised as people disturbing public order, regardless of the severity of the offences (Ahmady et al., 2020; Souverein et al., 2022; Tomita & Panzaru, 2010). Through the 2021 Juvenile Protection Law, the previously established "rehabilitation through labour" policy is now demolished and replaced with re-education and rehabilitation, aiming to reshape these delinquents into better individuals capable of fitting in society and restoring social order (Li & Su, 2020; Liu & Sun, 2024; Yang & Zhao, 2021; Zhang & Yao, 2023). In this context, rehabilitation refers to the process of restoring juveniles with offences through education into law-abiding individuals. This involves providing the juveniles with the necessary legal knowledge, the importance of maintaining social order and discipline, and vocational skills to ensure they can fit into their community (Li & Su, 2020; Liu & Sun, 2024; Yang & Zhao, 2021; Zhang & Yao, 2023).

The rehabilitation processes can occur in special schools designed for these juveniles, instilling and reshaping them to experience behavioural changes while understanding the root causes of such behaviours (Ahmady et al., 2020; Liu & Sun, 2024; Souverein et al., 2022; Tomita & Panzaru, 2010). Expert educators are frequently involved in this process, and they are needed to reinvent these juveniles by shifting their identities into individuals who can display a refreshed sense of values and beliefs (Ahmady et al., 2020; Li & Su, 2020; Messner et al., 2018; Yang & Zhao, 2021). At the end of the rehabilitation process and re-education, these juveniles are expected to be reintegrated into families, daily schools, and communities. The correctional experiences these juveniles have had can be utilised to reconnect themselves with others, leading to proper engagement with their community and, in return, supporting others experiencing similar issues (Li & Su, 2020; Messner et al., 2018; Souverein et al., 2022; Yang & Zhao, 2021; Yang & Lei, 2019; Zhang & Yao, 2023).

Accordingly, rehabilitation, reinvention, and reintegration are the three main concepts utilised to help the juvenile delinquents in China (Li & Su, 2020; Liu & Sun, 2024; Messner et al., 2018; Yang & Zhao, 2021; Yang & Lei, 2019; Zhang & Yao, 2023). However, transformation is still necessary because the current rehabilitative procedures in these special schools are considered less effective and traditional, especially with the ongoing punishment model that

reinforces discipline through negative consequences for behaviours shown. The lack of literature documenting how the changes can occur and the lack of insight into the rehabilitation experiences contributed to the necessity for this research to occur.

Research Methodology

An exploratory qualitative research design was used to achieve the research objective. This design served to provide a detailed understanding of the subject or phenomenon of interest (Hunter et al., 2019; Olawale et al., 2023), which in this paper refers to the unclear understanding of the challenges faced by special schools in rehabilitating juvenile offenders into society. Simultaneously, this design could provide a more solid groundwork (Hunter et al., 2019; Olawale et al., 2023) to understand the specific challenges in rehabilitating those juvenile students in Chinese special schools, thereby enriching the literature of juvenile rehabilitation.

A special school located in the Guangdong Province was selected. This special school was chosen for the following reasons: First, the school had a dedicated room for psychological and counselling consultation. This room had different facilities, such as sand tables, interactive toys, and karaoke systems, alongside interior designs that were not meant to instil an intimidating tone, to comfort the students who wished to consult experts for guidance. Secondly, security cameras are installed in the psychological and counselling consultation room and various corners of the school to ensure safety. These cameras are necessary to ensure no bullying or conflicts among students, and that the students are constantly reminded to display good behaviour at all times. Besides the cameras, teachers are assigned patrolling duties to maintain school discipline.

At the same time, the students in this school were divided according to their age (grades 8 to 12), grades, and academic performance. The school's daily routines included subject learning and physical activities, but students were also divided according to gender, with limited interactions in the school environment. This meant that there were all-boys classrooms and all-girls classrooms.

Sample Selection

For the purpose of this paper, two school teachers and three students enrolled in this school were selected. The selection was made due to the school's decision only to permit these members to be participants for the present paper, and the researchers agreed to the conditions. This meant that the samples available resulted from availability sampling, wherein samples are only made available due to certain conditions implemented. While the school teachers were existing male staff employed in the special school, the three students were identified as juvenile offenders. They were undergoing rehabilitation at the time the research was conducted. The following provides a brief description of the background of these juvenile offenders.

- Student 1 (Male): This student suffered from academic pressure and constant failure in academic performance.
- Student 2 (Female): This student experienced constant parental neglect and was once accused of injuring other students.
- Student 3 (Male): This student was transferred to the special school due to numerous bullying cases despite warnings and detentions given.

The school also clarified that there would be no mention of any sensitive information or details that would otherwise reveal the school's identity to the public, and only generalised explanations, codes, and pseudonyms could be used. For ethical considerations, the researchers agreed to these terms and henceforth, no details that would breach the terms were given throughout the reporting of this paper.

Research Instruments

The research was conducted using semi-structured interviews and field observations. Semi-structured interviews were conducted to understand the rehabilitation processes that occurred in this special school from a two-sided perspective, involving the teachers to describe the processes and the students' experiences of going through the rehabilitation processes. The semi-structured interviews had questions derived from the literature, and they were not designed to be too rigid to allow participants to express freely during the interview sessions. This further allowed the comparison of responses to identify the challenges faced by both sides during rehabilitation. The interview sessions were conducted in the psychology and counselling room. However, for the interview sessions with the three students, the school had requested one teacher to remain in the observatory room to observe the interview sessions to ensure no potential conflicts arose. This teacher was not among the male teachers recruited in the interview sessions, and they were only required to interfere with the interview sessions if conflicts arose.

As for the field observation, the researchers observed a total of five classes. Two classes involved the male teachers' session with the students; the other three classes were observed where the recruited three students were. The observation was conducted in a non-participant manner with no interaction with any of the teachers and students throughout. Field notes were made during the observation process, wherein the researchers wrote down anything that caught their attention. Generally, all interview sessions and classroom observations were conducted for a month, which was the entirety of May 2025.

Braun and Clarke's thematic analysis was used to analyse the data obtained from the interview and observation sessions. The scholars' six steps of thematic analysis are widely used in many pieces of research utilising qualitative inquiries (Dawadi, 2020; Maguire & Delahunt, 2017). These six steps are (1) familiarizing with the data, (2) generating initial codes from the data, (3) developing relevant themes from the codes, (4) reviewing and checking the themes established, (5) naming the themes, and (6) reporting the finalised themes.

Findings

A total of three themes were identified from the interview and classroom observations conducted. The first theme obtained is the recognition of students as school delinquents. Based on the responses of the teachers and students, the delinquency label was evident in the school community.

Teacher 1: These students are one of them (delinquents). It's not stated in their profiles, but we refer to them as one since they are transferred to our school. You won't come here without a reason, right?

Teacher 2: They are problematic. These students are aware of it, too.

Student 1: Yeah, I know. That's what we are called (delinquents), so there's nothing I can do about it. I'll just have to work hard, I guess.

Student 2: My parents called me like that. My teachers called us that, too. After a while, it feels like nothing anymore.

Student 3: This is the name given to us. We did something wrong, and it was already there way before I was transferred to this school.

The researchers noticed that Student 1 and Student 3 sounded somewhat defeated; the students' tone seemed less confident in their responses. However, there appeared to be some frustration in Student 2's tone.

The second theme that emerged from the teachers' and students' responses was the lack of one-to-one counselling sessions. Interestingly, there was a slight contrast between the teachers' and students' responses. The following presents the quotes taken from the participants' responses.

Teacher 1: It's mostly in groups. There are many students, so obviously, having a one-to-one session with them is not possible. It saves our time, too.

Teacher 2: It's possible to have a one-to-one session, but the way the system works is to implement group counselling instead. I mean, we know it is time and cost-effective. We can't allocate much to the students. I know we should address the problematic students, but sometimes we need to consider the resources that we have.

Student 1: I have visited this room many times, but it is mostly in groups. Everyone pretty much receives the same motivation. I mean... I did receive motivation from my teachers, but that is like a once-in-a-while thing.

Student 2: I want a personal session. I want to talk. It would be nice if there weren't others around me all the time.

Student 3: I think that's fine with me. If there's really a need, I'll head to the office instead.

Except for Student 3, the remaining participants acknowledged that the counselling sessions were conducted mainly in a group manner. However, Student 1 and Student 2 made their responses apparent that they would prefer having a one-to-one session with their teachers, even though it was deemed not feasible by the school teachers.

The third and final theme was a clear segregation of gender among students. Based on the responses, the teachers attempted to justify the policy of not having students of different genders study in the same classes, while the students expressed a desire for communication.

Teacher 1: They are not here to date. They are here to rehabilitate, so as long as they perform well in classes, they can interact with the opposite gender in the future.

Teacher 2: We don't want any sort of interaction that may cause any unnecessary problems. It's not that there shouldn't be any interaction, but the focus is to shape themselves to be better individuals first, right?

Student 1: Previously, I got to learn together with the girls in my class. Why can't I do that here?

Student 2: I prefer a mixed gender class. It's fun. At least I have more friends.

Student 3: I don't know. I don't understand why. It's just talking to each other.

The responses showed that the teachers believed dating would occur if male and female students were placed together. However, the students seemed to desire interaction with others instead. Student 1 also questioned implementing such a system when he had experience learning in a mixed gender class before transferring to the special school.

Next, in all five observation sessions, the researchers could conclude that the rehabilitation and learning processes were teacher-centred. Both Teacher 1 and Teacher 2 were found to be presenting themselves as authoritative figures in the class, maintaining strict discipline among students. These teachers had a firm and strict tone throughout the delivery of lessons. At the same time, both classes where Teacher 1 and Teacher 2 were in had students silently listening to the lessons. The interaction between teachers and students was mostly unidirectional, wherein the teachers were the ones explaining the instructions and knowledge to be learned. All student activities were found to be done individually in the lessons, and there was no interaction among the students.

This also applied to the three students whom the researchers observed. The three students were found to be attentive during lessons and had little to no interaction with their classmates. However, the researchers found that all five field observations in the classes had designs that were made to be lively due to bright colours being used to paint the walls. The walls were also decorated with some lively cartoon figures and motivational quotes that aimed at fostering better human qualities. For example, one of the motivational quotes was “to be virtue is to admit the mistakes and fix them (知错能改，善莫大焉).” Another quote found among the classes was “it is never too late to amend your mistakes (亡羊补牢，未为迟也).” Each class was also equipped with a shelf designated as a reading corner for students to read during their breaks. Some classes also had board games available, and the researchers noticed the students were playing with them during breaks. Generally, there was laughter among the students during breaks.

Discussion

From all the responses gathered, it is evident that the school was attempting to provide rehabilitation to the students. However, the environment and system affected the quality of rehabilitation, leading to a conflict of beliefs and interaction among the teachers and students. The manner in which teachers identified the students as "delinquents" and the students themselves acknowledged they were "delinquents" strongly suggested the normalisation of viewing all students in the special school as delinquents (Chen, 2023; Ntinis, 2007). This subsequently means the students are often considered as being problematic, and they are here to be rectified. Instead of rehabilitating the students, the delinquent label reinforced the punishment in this special school. This environment shaped the students as they were constantly reminded of their punishment for being transferred to the special school.

Based on the participants' responses, the researchers further criticized the irony of having a psychology and counselling room that contrasted the idea of rehabilitating the students. Despite the room's design to be friendly with various facilities available, labelling the students as delinquents and apparent normalisation of the term in the school setting did not make the rehabilitation process any friendlier. Thus, this leads to students being constantly punished, and teacher prejudice is most likely to occur throughout the rehabilitation and learning

processes. The researchers also do not dismiss the possibility of mistreatment, as the teachers themselves are viewing the students as problematic delinquents rather than individuals who are looking for change to be better society members in the future.

The punishment also extended to gender segregation, as it is apparent in the students' responses that they previously went to schools where male and female students learned together in classes. Student 1's tone of questioning the system was one such evidence that he was not satisfied with the necessity to separate genders in the classroom, having no opportunities to interact with female students. Student 3's tone also added to the dissatisfaction, as the participant was apparently baffled by the system. The implementation of the gender segregation system in this special school had thus restricted proper social norms from occurring, as the Chinese society, like any society across the globe, generally allows males and females to interact on a daily basis. Furthermore, based on each student's background, there was no apparent evidence that the students were sent to the special school due to problems interacting with the opposite gender. Despite the teachers' justification of preventing students from dating, the researchers believed the system was unnecessary, as the students knew they were here for rehabilitation.

Based on the second theme, the researchers would like to criticise the lack of proper support for the students in the special school. While it was evident that the school had provided various facilities for the teachers and students' perusal, the lack of professional contact between the teachers and students amplified the lack of necessary support to strengthen the rehabilitation process. Student 1 and Student 2's responses clearly indicated that the professional counselling support was limited, and given the possibility of many students requiring professional help in terms of psychological aspects, the researchers would like to criticize further that achieving time and cost-effectiveness was more focused maintaining the resources available and keeping the school's interest to stay sustainable rather than accommodating more for the students. This also informed the fact that the special school did not have sufficient counsellors to provide the necessary support to the students.

Student 1 and Student 2's responses further indicated the need for human interaction to occur. The responses from Student 1 indicated that the motivation and encouragement given by the teachers were too general, and that every student would receive the same sentences during the session. Student 2 preferred individual time with the teacher, as her sentence suggested the availability for her to communicate with the teacher personally. These responses strongly suggested the need for personal and individualized space for students to have their needs, concerns, and thoughts met and addressed. However, the lack of support and one-to-one sessions only strengthened the need for these forms of support to occur, and the special school in this research had yet to fulfil these conditions.

The occurrence of teachers as authoritative figures and conducting lessons in a teacher-centred manner also hinted at having punishments as the primary method to achieve rehabilitation. This created an impression among the researchers that the students had to listen to their teachers because of their wrongdoings, and they needed an authoritative figure to correct their wrongdoings. Hence, the researchers would like to criticize the flaw of utilising these methods, as there would be no meaningful learning and rehabilitation. Students became passive and receptive listeners (Garrett, 2008; Woods & Copur-Gencturk, 2024) of

the rehabilitation process, accepting the pieces of knowledge delivered as they were. This also created an impression where the students were intimidated by their teachers and the existing rehabilitation system. The researchers would also like to criticize the fact that the students might not fully understand what it means to be better citizens. While societal values could be instilled, the students might not understand the rights and wrongs of their previously made mistakes.

From an overall perspective, although achieving social reintegration through the rehabilitation of the juvenile students is one of the main goals established in the Chinese national education system, the researchers criticized such an environment and support in the special school selected for research only makes the goal more challenging to reach. At the same time, while the special school had policies aligned with the educational objective of students being self-reliant and independent to perform well in society, the lack of human support and the use of the delinquent label may contribute to the failure to achieve the ultimate goal. All of these are thus aligned with the literature discussed, wherein the lack of support will lead to poor psychological and counselling changes. Although several entertainment and leisure facilities were made available, such as board games and reading corners, the researchers could argue that there was still a lack of sufficient professional support to facilitate the rehabilitation process.

Conclusion

From the responses gathered, it is evident that challenges do occur in the special school where the research is conducted. However, while the research objective is achieved, the issue of concern is the environment and setting that do not promote effective and quality rehabilitation for the students. The lack of human and professional support, alongside the use of the delinquency label and a less humane system, has enabled and led to the poor implementation of the rehabilitation service in the special school.

Youth correction and the Chinese juvenile system remain present in contemporary China. Still, it is apparent that punishment is the preferred method of rehabilitation, despite re-education, reinvention, and reintegration methods being implemented in special schools, especially in the case of the present research. Although the Juvenile Protection Law and Juvenile Delinquency Prevention Law are available in China, the concept of re-education and reintegration remains largely traditional, using punishment as the main form to achieve the goal of rehabilitation. As punishment is found to have negative effects during rehabilitation, a more humane approach is needed to raise the quality of rehabilitation services in this special school.

Nevertheless, findings of the present research cannot be generalised to other schools; the findings obtained are only meant to describe the current situation of rehabilitation of juvenile students transferred to this special school in Guangdong Province. Due to the limited availability of teachers and students, as requested by the school, the description of the rehabilitation process may not provide sufficient information about the current state of the rehabilitation process.

For future research purposes, interested scholars may consider selecting other special schools to recruit more teachers and students to describe the current state of rehabilitation of

juvenile students in the process of reintegrating them into Chinese society. Using surveys to recruit the teachers and students, alongside negotiating the terms to conduct the research within the school to achieve common ground, should help reveal the state of the rehabilitation process while fulfilling the needs of special schools. This will allow for the generalisation of data, promoting a better description of the state of rehabilitation processes in the selected special schools.

Furthermore, longer observation sessions can be conducted to explore more of the specific experiences in the rehabilitation programmes. The observation sessions can document how the juvenile offenders are being rehabilitated, including receiving academic guidance and psychological counselling. The researchers suggest conducting the observation sessions among different teachers and students, documenting the behaviours and attitudes shown in classrooms and counselling rooms for a few weeks.

Juvenile delinquency and juvenile offenders are topics that remain of interest among many scholars, particularly in China, due to constant calls for better reinvention and reintegration alongside implementing better rehabilitation processes. The lack of humane approaches, specifically through labels that create stigma, segregation of genders, and unavailability of personal professional sessions, has resulted in the poor management of rehabilitation centres for these juveniles in China, thus strengthening the necessity for overall structural change. The existing and rigid rehabilitation structure of the rehabilitation processes requires revision, and teachers must understand that labels like “delinquent” do not help in improving the process due to the social stigma placed on the students. Ultimately, relevant authorities must redirect and allocate proper resources to the special schools to ensure students’ needs are fully met and to ensure successful reinvention and reintegration.

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