

Effectiveness of Rehabilitation Programmes in Zambia's Reformatory Schools for Juvenile Offenders

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Abstract: *This study examined the effectiveness of rehabilitation programmes in Zambia's reformatory schools for juvenile offenders, guided by Rehabilitation Theory. A qualitative approach, grounded in an interpretivist paradigm, was employed using a descriptive case study design. Data were collected from three institutions; Nakambala Approved School, Insakwe Approved School, and Katombora Reformatory School—through semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions involving 39 participants, including juvenile inmates, correctional officers, teachers, and social welfare officers. Thematic analysis revealed that rehabilitation programmes are multi-dimensional, incorporating education, vocational training, counselling, and psychosocial support, delivered through a multidisciplinary approach. Findings indicate that these programmes contribute to behavioural change, skill acquisition, and reintegration outcomes such as continued education, employment, and entrepreneurship among some former juvenile offenders. However, the effectiveness of these interventions is constrained by limited monitoring and evaluation systems, reliance on anecdotal evidence, and inconsistent post-release follow-up mechanisms. The study concludes that while rehabilitation programmes in Zambia are conceptually aligned with the principles of Rehabilitation Theory, their full potential is undermined by implementation gaps. It recommends strengthening monitoring and evaluation frameworks, enhancing reintegration support, increasing resource allocation, and promoting multi-stakeholder collaboration to improve sustainability and reduce recidivism. The study contributes to policy and practice by providing empirical insights into strengthening juvenile rehabilitation systems in Zambia.*

Keywords: Juvenile offenders, Rehabilitation, Recidivism, Reformatory school

1. Introduction

The global shift from punitive incarceration to rehabilitative approaches has increasingly emphasised the importance of equipping juvenile offenders with skills and values to reintegrate into society as responsible citizens. According to Lambert and Hogan (2019), while imprisonment serves multiple purposes including retribution and deterrence, rehabilitation remains a key objective of correctional systems, especially for young offenders. Juvenile rehabilitation seeks to foster behaviour change through programmes such as vocational training, education, counselling, and psychosocial support (Bradshaw & Roseborough, 2015).

In Zambia, this approach has been formalized through policy and legal frameworks such as the Children's Code of 2022 (Act No. 12 of 2022), which provides for the protection, care, and rehabilitation of children in conflict with the law. The Act recognizes the importance of restorative justice, individualized rehabilitation, and reintegration of child offenders, while prohibiting practices that may infringe on children's rights during incarceration.

Despite this progressive legislation, the effectiveness of rehabilitation programmes remains questionable. Many juveniles continue to re-offend after release, suggesting that either the programmes are ineffective or not fully implemented. Chizimba and Mumanga (2022) observed that while Zambia Correctional Services have introduced various rehabilitation initiatives, including behavioural therapy and vocational training, the systemic gaps such as understaffing, lack of psychological support, and poor monitoring mechanisms continue to undermine their success.

Moreover, studies in similar contexts (e.g. Foster & Gifford, 2016; Mumba, 2016) have tended to focus on the existence of these programmes rather than their outcomes. As such, there is insufficient empirical evidence on how effective these rehabilitation programmes truly are in reducing recidivism and reintegrating juveniles into society. This study aims to fill that gap by assessing the effectiveness of rehabilitation efforts at key reformatory schools in Zambia.

2. Statement of the Problem

Although the Children's Code Act of 2022 mandates the Zambian government to provide child-sensitive justice and rehabilitation, high recidivism rates among juvenile offenders persist. According to Hagwana (2021), approximately 68% of juveniles in Zambian correctional facilities are repeat offenders, raising concerns about the actual impact of current rehabilitation interventions.

Chizimba and Mumanga (2022) found that rehabilitation in Zambian reformatory schools is largely constrained by limited resources, insufficient follow-up mechanisms, and inadequate staff training. Despite the legislative progress, these programmes often fail to address the underlying social, psychological, and educational needs of juvenile offenders. Moreover, most studies have focused on programme structure and availability, with little attention paid to evaluating their actual effectiveness in modifying juvenile behaviour and promoting reintegration.

Therefore, this study seeks to assess the effectiveness of correctional rehabilitation programmes on juvenile offenders in Zambia, using two approved schools and one reformatory school as case studies. The findings will help determine

whether current interventions align with the objectives of the Children's Code Act of 2022 and contribute to lasting behavioural change among juvenile offenders.

3. Theoretical Framework

This study is anchored in the Rehabilitation Theory, which underpins the modern approach to corrections by emphasizing the reformation and reintegration of offenders rather than punitive measures. The theory asserts that criminal behaviour is often a result of social, economic, psychological, or environmental disadvantages that impede individuals' ability to make lawful choices. As such, rehabilitation seeks to address these underlying factors through targeted interventions.

According to Kayes, Mudge, and Bright (2015), the Rehabilitation Theory promotes treatment-oriented correctional practices aimed at transforming offenders into law-abiding citizens. It views offenders as capable of change, especially when provided with opportunities to develop vocational, educational, psychological, and social competencies. The theory also aligns with the humanitarian belief in the dignity and worth of every individual, advocating for interventions that foster personal development and societal reintegration (Chamberlain, 2015).

In the context of juvenile justice, rehabilitation is particularly critical. Juvenile offenders are in a formative stage of development, and correctional interventions can have lasting impacts—positive or negative. The Rehabilitation Theory therefore supports the application of programmes that are not only corrective but also developmental and supportive, including behavioural therapy, education, vocational training, psychological counselling, and spiritual guidance.

This theoretical lens is reinforced by Siegel (2005), who argues that effective rehabilitation requires “changing the attitude and behaviour of criminals so that they will be able to choose lawful means in satisfying their needs.” Dinitz and Dine (1979) further emphasize that rehabilitation must aim at the social reintegration of offenders, preparing them to function positively within their communities after release.

By applying the Rehabilitation Theory, this study evaluates the extent to which correctional programmes in Zambian reformatory schools are achieving their intended purpose and transforming juvenile offenders into responsible, productive citizens. The theory provides a foundation for assessing the alignment between program design, delivery, and actual behavioural outcomes among juveniles.

4. Methodology

Approach and Design

This study employed a qualitative research approach underpinned by the interpretivist paradigm, which aims to understand the lived experiences and perceptions of individuals involved in juvenile rehabilitation. A descriptive research design was adopted to enable an in-depth examination of the effectiveness of rehabilitation programmes in selected reformatory schools.

Target Population and Sampling

The target population included juvenile inmates, Zambia Correctional Services officers, social welfare representatives, and teachers. A purposive sampling technique was used to identify information-rich participants who had direct experience with the rehabilitation process. The study sample comprised 39 participants: 12 juvenile inmates, 9 correctional officers, 9 teachers, and 9 social welfare representatives across three institutions—Nakambala Approved School, Insakwe Approved School, and Katombora Reformatory School.

Data Collection Methods

Two primary instruments were used:

- Interview guides for correctional officers, teachers, and social welfare staff.
- Focus Group Discussion (FGD) guides for juvenile inmates.

These tools allowed for flexibility and probing to capture nuanced insights into the implementation and perceived effectiveness of the rehabilitation programmes. Data collection proceeded in three phases: obtaining ethical clearance and permissions, conducting face-to-face interviews, and holding FGDs.

Data Analysis

Thematic analysis was employed to identify recurring patterns and themes within the qualitative data. Responses were transcribed, coded, and categorized to develop meaningful insights aligned with the study objectives.

Trustworthiness

To ensure trustworthiness, the study incorporated member checking, where participants reviewed and validated the interpreted data. Efforts were made to maintain consistency in how questions were understood and answered across all participants.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval was obtained from Kwame Nkrumah University. Participants were assured of confidentiality and anonymity, and informed consent was secured before participation. No personal identifiers were used in reporting the data.

5. Results

The findings are presented using thematic analysis, where recurring patterns from interviews and focus group discussions were coded and grouped into three major themes aligned with the research questions:

- a) What programmes have been implemented by the approved and reformatory schools to rehabilitate juvenile offenders in Zambia?
- b) How effective are the correctional rehabilitation programmes on juvenile offenders in Zambia?
- c) 3, What strategies can be put in place to enhance the effectiveness of rehabilitation programmes on juvenile offenders in Zambia?

5.1 Theme 1: Nature and Scope of Rehabilitation Programmes

The findings indicate that the three institutions; Nakambala Approved School, Insakwe Approved School, and Katombora Reformatory School operate under structured mandates that combine custodial care with rehabilitation and skills development.

An officer from Katombora emphasized the institutional mandate, noting that:

"the core business for the centre is threefold namely custodial, correctional and industrial focus".

This highlights the multi-functional nature of the facility, where rehabilitation is embedded within broader correctional responsibilities.

Similarly, a social worker at Insakwe explained the welfare-oriented dimension of the institution, stating that:

"our mandate... is to ensure that the child offenders are received, trained and maintained".

This reflects an integrated approach that goes beyond punishment to include care and development.

Another participant reinforced this protective role by noting that:

"the centre is a place of safety for offenders and children in conflict with the law and those children who are victims of abuse".

This suggests that rehabilitation programmes are not only corrective but also responsive to vulnerability and trauma.

Across all centres, rehabilitation programmes were found to be holistic, incorporating counselling, education, vocational training, and recreational activities. The presence of multidisciplinary staff was also highlighted. As one officer explained:

"we have officers such as social workers, skill trainers, teachers, chaplain and psychologists to ensure adequate handling of the juvenile needs".

This demonstrates that rehabilitation is approached as a comprehensive and structured process, targeting behavioural, emotional, and socio-economic dimensions of juvenile offending.

5.2 Theme 2: Perceived Effectiveness of Rehabilitation Programmes

The effectiveness of rehabilitation programmes was perceived positively, though largely supported by experiential and anecdotal evidence. One prominent sub-theme is emotional attachment and behavioural change, as reflected in the observation that:

"some juveniles tend to request that they visit the facility when they have already been discharged".

This suggests that the centres may provide a supportive environment that fosters a sense of belonging and positive

behavioural transformation. Another respondent further emphasized the supportive environment, noting that:

"the centre becomes like a home to some... as they are provided with groceries every month and meals every day".

This indicates that meeting basic needs may contribute significantly to stability and rehabilitation

Evidence of economic empowerment and self-reliance also emerged. A respondent explained that;

"one of the boys accumulated about 2000 which became a start-up capital for his business after discharge".

This illustrates how vocational and financial support components of rehabilitation can translate into tangible post-release outcomes. Similarly, educational advancement was highlighted, with one participant stating that;

"one of the clients continued her education after discharge and is now at Ndola Central Hospital doing nursing".

Another added that;

"another [is] already working and frequently visits the facility".

These accounts demonstrate successful reintegration into both educational and professional spheres.

Counselling and structured activities were also identified as central to effectiveness. The consistent provision of both individual and group counselling, alongside activities such as sports, gardening, and spiritual engagement, suggests that rehabilitation is designed to foster discipline, emotional stability, and personal development.

However, these narratives demonstrate positive outcomes, they also point to a reliance on isolated success cases, indicating a lack of systematic mechanisms for measuring long-term programme effectiveness.

5.3 Theme 3: Strategies for Enhancing Rehabilitation Effectiveness

Participants identified several strategies aimed at strengthening the effectiveness of rehabilitation programmes, many of which involve collaboration and post-release support.

A key strategy is partnership with external organizations. Respondents noted that Development Aid from People to People (DAPP) plays a significant role, particularly in education sponsorship. This collaboration extends opportunities for juveniles beyond institutional confinement.

Another important strategy is post-release follow-up and reintegration support. As one officer explained,

"when the juveniles are discharged, there is a follow-up program in the districts where the offenders come from".

This reflects an effort to maintain continuity between institutional rehabilitation and community reintegration. Restorative justice practices were also highlighted. An officer from Katombora noted that;

"we have a program involving restorative justice which allows former juvenile offenders to reconcile with people they offended".

This indicates a shift towards repairing social relationships and promoting accountability.

Preventive strategies through sensitization were also evident. One participant explained that;
"officers from DEC... are invited to give a talk on drug abuse",

While others noted the involvement of police and health professionals. These interventions aim to address underlying risk factors associated with offending behaviour. Individualized rehabilitation approaches were particularly evident at Insakwe. As one respondent explained,
"whenever a girl is brought to the centre, she is assessed to establish the gravity of the problem before admission".

This allows for tailored interventions that respond to the specific needs of each juvenile. Additionally, community and NGO support was emphasized, with participants noting that:
"Well-wishers... visit the facility with some items... and also provide start-up packs for those girls who would have acquired skills".

This highlights the importance of external support in facilitating successful reintegration. Overall, these strategies demonstrate a multi-layered approach to enhancing rehabilitation effectiveness combining institutional efforts with community and stakeholder involvement.

6. Discussion

The findings of this study strongly resonate with the core assumptions of Rehabilitation Theory, which posits that criminal behaviour is shaped by social, psychological, and environmental factors and can be corrected through structured interventions.

Firstly, the presence of multi-dimensional rehabilitation programmes aligns with the theory's emphasis on addressing the root causes of offending behaviour. Educational, vocational, and counselling services reflect what Kayes et al. (2015) describe as treatment-oriented correctional approaches, aimed at equipping offenders with skills for lawful living. The involvement of multidisciplinary professionals further reinforces the theoretical claim that effective rehabilitation requires integrated support systems.

Secondly, evidence of behavioural transformation and reintegration success supports the argument by Siegel (2005) that rehabilitation should focus on changing attitudes and enabling offenders to adopt socially acceptable behaviours. The reported cases of juveniles continuing education, gaining employment, and starting businesses demonstrate that rehabilitation programmes can foster self-reliance and social responsibility, key indicators of successful reintegration.

However, the findings also expose limitations in fully realizing Rehabilitation Theory in practice. The reliance on anecdotal success stories rather than systematic outcome

measurement suggests gaps in monitoring and evaluation. This challenges the theoretical expectation that rehabilitation should produce consistent and measurable behavioural change, particularly in reducing recidivism.

Furthermore, while follow-up mechanisms and restorative justice initiatives align with Dinitz and Dine's (1979) emphasis on social reintegration, their effectiveness appears uneven and underdeveloped. This indicates a disconnect between programme design and long-term impact, a common critique of rehabilitation systems in resource-constrained contexts.

The collaborative strategies identified, including partnerships with NGOs and government agencies, reflect the theory's broader social perspective that rehabilitation extends beyond institutions into the community. However, the effectiveness of these collaborations depends on sustainability, coordination, and resource availability, which remain potential constraints.

Overall, the study confirms that while Zambia's reformatory schools are conceptually aligned with Rehabilitation Theory, implementation gaps limit the full realization of its transformative potential.

7. Conclusion

This study set out to assess the effectiveness of rehabilitation programmes in Zambia's reformatory schools for juvenile offenders. Using thematic analysis, the findings reveal that rehabilitation efforts are comprehensive, multi-dimensional, and theoretically grounded, incorporating educational, vocational, psychological, and social interventions.

Evidence suggests that these programmes have the potential to facilitate behavioural change and successful reintegration, as demonstrated by cases of continued education, employment, and entrepreneurship among former inmates. The involvement of multidisciplinary professionals and external stakeholders further strengthens programme delivery.

However, the study also highlights critical challenges, including:

- Limited systematic evaluation of outcomes
- Over-reliance on anecdotal evidence
- Inconsistent follow-up and reintegration mechanisms

These gaps indicate that while the programmes align with the principles of Rehabilitation Theory, their effectiveness is not fully optimized.

In conclusion, rehabilitation programmes in Zambia's reformatory schools are promising but require strengthening in monitoring, evaluation, and post-release support systems to achieve sustainable reductions in juvenile recidivism and ensure meaningful societal reintegration.

8. Recommendations

Based on the findings and the principles of Rehabilitation Theory, the study proposes the following recommendations:

8.1 Strengthening Monitoring and Evaluation Systems

There is need for the Children's Code Act No. 12 of 2022 to be operationalized through robust monitoring and evaluation frameworks. Government and correctional authorities should develop clear indicators for measuring rehabilitation outcomes, including recidivism rates, employment, and educational progression of former juvenile offenders. This will move assessment beyond anecdotal evidence to systematic evaluation.

8.2 Enhancing Post-Release Reintegration Programmes

The study recommends strengthening follow-up mechanisms by establishing structured reintegration programmes at district level. These should include:

- Community mentorship programmes
- Continuous counselling services
- Linkages to employment and education

Such interventions will ensure continuity between institutional rehabilitation and community life, thereby reducing the likelihood of re-offending.

8.3 Increasing Resource Allocation and Capacity Building

Government should increase funding to reformatory schools to address resource constraints affecting programme delivery. This includes:

- Recruitment of more qualified personnel (psychologists, social workers, vocational trainers)
- Provision of adequate training materials and infrastructure
- Continuous professional development for staff
- Capacity building will enhance the quality and consistency of rehabilitation services.

8.4 Strengthening Multi-Stakeholder Collaboration

The study recommends formalizing partnerships between correctional facilities and external stakeholders such as NGOs, faith-based organizations, and government agencies (e.g., Drug Enforcement Commission, Zambia Police Service). These collaborations should be institutionalized through policy frameworks to ensure sustainability and coordination.

8.5 Expanding Vocational and Entrepreneurship Programmes

Rehabilitation programmes should place greater emphasis on market-driven vocational skills and entrepreneurship training. Provision of start-up kits and financial literacy training should be standardized across all centres to enhance self-reliance among juveniles upon release.

8.6 Institutionalizing Individualized Rehabilitation Plans

Each juvenile offender should have a structured and documented rehabilitation plan based on initial assessment. This individualized approach will ensure that interventions address specific psychological, educational, and social needs, in line with Rehabilitation Theory.

8.7 Promoting Restorative Justice Practices

Restorative justice programmes should be expanded and integrated into all reformatory schools. These programmes can facilitate reconciliation between offenders and victims, promote accountability, and strengthen community acceptance of rehabilitated juveniles.

8.8 Strengthening Preventive and Sensitization Programmes

There is need to scale up sensitization programmes on issues such as drug abuse, crime prevention, and life skills. Regular engagement with institutions like the Drug Enforcement Commission and health professionals should be sustained to address root causes of juvenile delinquency.

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