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Understanding the Lived Experiences of Children in Conflict with the Law Undergoing a Rehabilitation Program in Solano, Nueva Vizcaya

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ABSTRACT

Children in Conflict with the Law (CICL) in the Philippines faced poverty, family problems, and stigma, making rehabilitation more than just following rules. This study focused on CICL in Solano, Nueva Vizcaya, showing how local conditions shaped their experiences and highlighted the need for child-centered programs. Guided by Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory and the Input–Process–Output model, the research examined how family, community, and institutional programs affected rehabilitation. Using a phenomenological design, the researchers conducted interviews and analyzed them using Colaizzi's method to capture the children's authentic voices. Findings revealed that while arrest was initially painful, participants later saw it as a rescue from worse paths. They struggled with loneliness, stress, and separation from their families, but support from family, staff, peers, and spiritual practices helped them cope. They valued mental and spiritual support more than material aid, and rehabilitation taught respect, prayer, and self-control. Some children took on leadership roles, developed stronger identities, and gained practical skills such as cleanliness and industriousness. Their experiences emphasized the importance of family visits, emotional support, and inclusive community reception. Ultimately, they aspired to finish school, support their families, and face stigma with resilience. The study recommended that CICL remain engaged in rehabilitation, while families, schools, communities, and local government provided consistent emotional, educational, and social support. By documenting these lived experiences, the research contributed localized insights that strengthened child-focused rehabilitation practices in rural settings.

Keywords— Children in conflict with the law (CICL), rehabilitation programs, lived experiences, Solano, Nueva Vizcaya

INTRODUCTION

A Child in Conflict with the Law (CICL) under RA 9344 as amended by RA 10630 is any person below 18 years old who is alleged, accused, or adjudged to have committed an offense under Philippine laws. Children below 15 are exempt from criminal liability, while those aged 15 to below 18 may be held liable only if proven to have acted with discernment.

Children in Conflict with the Law (CICL) represent one of the most vulnerable sectors of society, as they are minors who have allegedly or actually committed offenses but remain entitled to protection, development, and rehabilitation. In the Philippines, the juvenile justice system follows a restorative, child-centered framework that prioritizes reintegration over punishment. According to CICL often come from disadvantaged backgrounds characterized by poverty, family dysfunction, exposure to violence, and limited access to education, all of which contribute to their involvement in unlawful behavior. Furthermore, [2] emphasizes that children who enter the justice system frequently experience multiple vulnerabilities even before apprehension, including neglect, abuse, and social exclusion. These conditions underscore the need for rehabilitation programs that address not only legal accountability but also the developmental and psychosocial needs of the child.

In response, the Philippine government implements rehabilitation interventions primarily through the Department of Social Welfare and Development, which oversees residential and community-based programs for CICL. As outlined by rehabilitation services include psychological counseling, values formation, formal and nonformal education, life skills training, spiritual development, and family reintegration planning. These interventions are designed to promote behavioral change while safeguarding the rights and welfare of the child. Similarly, [16] explains that effective juvenile rehabilitation programs combine structured routines with therapeutic support to help youth rebuild social functioning and reduce recidivism. However, despite these comprehensive components, the actual experiences of children within such programs may vary depending on institutional conditions, staff capacity, and individual circumstances.

In the municipality of Solano, Nueva Vizcaya, CICL undergoing rehabilitation constitute a unique group whose lived experiences remain largely unexplored in academic literature. According to the [8] outcomes of community-based rehabilitation are strongly influenced by local conditions such as availability of social workers, accessibility of services, family participation, and community acceptance. Rural settings may also present additional barriers, including transportation difficulties, limited mental health resources, and heightened social stigma due to close community ties [1]. These factors may shape how rehabilitation programs are implemented and how children perceive their experiences. Understanding such localized realities is essential for designing interventions that are responsive, culturally sensitive, and child-centered.

Ultimately, understanding the lived experiences of CICL undergoing rehabilitation in Solano, Nueva Vizcaya is crucial for improving the responsiveness of juvenile justice interventions. Insights drawn from the children's own narratives can inform policymakers, social workers, educators, and community stakeholders about the actual needs of youth in conflict with the law. While the study is limited in scope to a small group of participants in one municipality, its findings may contribute to more context-sensitive rehabilitation practices and highlight areas where support systems can be strengthened. By documenting the voices of children, this research seeks to complement existing policy-focused studies with localized perspectives, thereby supporting a more compassionate and child-centered justice system.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study adopted a phenomenological research design [10] to explore the lived experiences of Children in Conflict with the Law (CICL) in Solano, Nueva Vizcaya. Phenomenology was appropriate because it sought to understand and describe the essence of participants' experiences, particularly their challenges, perceptions, and coping mechanisms during diversion and intervention processes.

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, allowing participants to freely articulate their perspectives. The analysis followed Colaizzi's (1978) phenomenological method, which involved:

1. Reading all participants' descriptions to acquire a sense of their experiences.
2. Extracting significant statements.
3. Formulating meanings from these statements.
4. Organizing meanings into clusters of themes.
5. Developing an exhaustive description of the phenomenon.
6. Returning the findings to participants for member checking to validate accuracy.

7. Incorporating feedback into the final description.

This approach ensured that the voices of CICL were authentically represented and that the findings reflected the essence of their lived realities.

Population and Sample of the Study

The study population consisted of Children in Conflict with the Law (CICL) currently engaged in diversion and intervention programs in Solano, Nueva Vizcaya. Purposive sampling was employed to select participants who met specific criteria: officially recognized as CICL and actively participating in diversion and intervention processes.

The number of participants was determined by the principle of data saturation, meaning interviews continued until no new themes or insights emerged. This ensured depth and richness of data rather than a predetermined fixed number.

Secondary informants, such as social workers and program staff, were included for triangulation, but the primary focus remained on the lived experiences of CICL.

The intended number of participants was five; however, the analysis draws on only three informants, consistent with the study's phenomenological orientation, which privileges depth over breadth. This decision was influenced by participants' hesitation in responding to the interview questions and by respect for their privacy [10]. Participant codes R3 and R5 were assigned during recruitment but were excluded from the final analysis because these individuals were unable to complete the interview and provided insufficient data for phenomenological analysis. The final analysis is based on three participants: R1, R2, and R4.

Data Collection Methods

Semi-structured interviews were the primary data-gathering tool. Prior to interviews, informed consent was obtained from the MSWDO, participants, and guardians when necessary. Interviews were conducted in private settings to ensure confidentiality and encourage openness.

The interview guide included open-ended questions focusing on:

- Participants' personal profiles.
- Challenges encountered during diversion and intervention.
- Experiences of social stigma and support systems.
- Suggestions for improving programs.

Responses were documented through note-taking and audio recordings (with consent).

To ensure rigor, the study followed Lincoln and Guba's (1985) criteria for trustworthiness. Credibility was established through member checking with participants and prolonged engagement to capture authentic experiences. The study achieved transferability by providing rich, detailed descriptions of the research context and participants, enabling readers to assess the applicability of findings to other settings. Dependability was maintained by keeping a clear audit trail of all procedures, decisions, and methodological steps, ensuring consistency and transparency throughout the research process. Finally, confirmability was strengthened through reflexive journaling and triangulation, which minimized researcher bias and ensured that the findings genuinely reflected the voices and lived realities of Children in Conflict with the Law.

As a phenomenological study, the researcher acknowledged the need for bracketing, setting aside personal preconceptions and biases to allow participants' experiences to emerge authentically. The researcher practiced reflexivity throughout the research process by maintaining a journal to critically reflect on the researcher's role, assumptions, and influence on the study.

D. Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using Colaizzi's (1978) phenomenological method. Transcriptions were coded, clustered into themes, and synthesized into an exhaustive description of CICL's lived experiences.

Member checking involved returning preliminary findings to CICL participants for verification. Social workers' input was treated as expert validation/triangulation, not member checking. Participants confirmed that the themes accurately reflected their experiences. The validated themes form the basis of the findings presented.

E. Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory

This study is grounded in Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory, which emphasizes that multiple, interrelated environmental systems shape child development. For Children in Conflict with the Law (CICL), these systems include immediate influences such as family and peers, as well as broader structures like institutions, communities, and cultural norms. By situating CICL within these nested contexts, the theory offers a lens for understanding how rehabilitation experiences are not only personal but also socially and structurally mediated. This perspective is particularly relevant in Solano, Nueva Vizcaya, where local conditions such as limited resources, close-knit community ties, and prevailing social stigma interact with children's individual struggles during rehabilitation.

At the microsystem level, CICL directly engage with family members, rehabilitation staff, and peers, and these relationships strongly shape their emotional well-being, coping strategies, and perceptions of support. The mesosystem highlights the connections between family, school, and rehabilitation programs, showing how consistency or gaps in values and expectations affect children's adjustment. Meanwhile, the ecosystem encompasses institutional policies, availability of social workers, and community attitudes, which indirectly influence rehabilitation outcomes even if children are not directly involved in these structures. The macrosystem, composed of cultural norms and legal frameworks, frames how CICL are perceived and treated, while the chronosystem underscores how experiences evolve over time, from apprehension to reintegration.

Applying this framework guides both inquiry and interpretation in the study. It directs attention to how children's lived experiences are shaped by the interplay of personal agency and environmental contexts, ensuring narratives are viewed not in isolation but as part of a broader developmental ecology. In analyzing the data, the framework helps identify how systemic factors such as stigma, resource limitations, and family involvement intersect with children's subjective meanings of rehabilitation. Thus, Bronfenbrenner's theory provides the conceptual scaffolding necessary to interpret CICL's experiences in Solano, Nueva Vizcaya, offering insights into how localized conditions influence rehabilitation and reintegration processes.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Theme 1: "Napunta Ako sa Maling Landas" — The Phenomenology of Entry into the Juvenile Justice System

The first theme illuminates how participants narrate their passage from community life into custodial rehabilitation. Two sub-themes constitute this theme. The first concerns the entangled agency through which participants interpret the events that led to their offense. The second captures a dual phenomenological register in which apprehension is experienced simultaneously as acute rupture and, subsequently, as a timely rescue from a worsening trajectory. Taken together, these sub-themes answer, at least in part, the study's first research question by disclosing not only what happened to bring participants to rehabilitation but also how they make sense of those events.

Sub-theme 1.1: Entangled Agency — Peer Influence Interwoven with Personal Volition

Participants' accounts of the circumstances leading to their offenses consistently resisted a clean binary between victimization by peer influence and autonomous wrongdoing. Instead, they articulated a dialectical co-presence in which environmental temptation, peer prompting, curiosity, and intoxication operated alongside their own volition. R1, reflecting on his entry into substance use, gave this dialectic an explicit formulation:

"May mga kaibigan kang naging bad influence pero ginusto mo din naman kasi sa part ko parang ginusto ko din kasi 'yong curiosity na tinatawag kaya 'yon nasubukan ko rin gumamit pero once once lang then 'di ko ine-expect na ma-ru-ruined na lahat ng mga bagay."
— R1, 17

R2's account similarly located the precipitating event within peer interaction while foregrounding his own participation: "Nag-inom po kami kuya… Nagyaya po sila mag-ano mag droga kuya tapos hinuli kami diyan sa pinsan ko kuya." R4's recollection connected alcohol, peer initiation, and impulsive offending in a single narrative sequence: "Nag inom kami sa bagahabag tapos pag uwi po namin napagtripan po namin mag nakaw. Nag aya po yung isa naming tropa magnakaw, lasing po kasi kami noon kaya nag sige po kami kuya."

These narratives align with the literature identifying peer influence and environmental disorganization as proximal risk factors in juvenile delinquency [9],[17]. The findings also corroborate [4] observation that poverty and dysfunctional social environments reduce supervision and render adolescents susceptible to negative peer pressure. However, the participants' own framing introduces a phenomenological complication absent from purely structural explanations: they refuse to absolve themselves and explicitly reject causal accounts that locate blame entirely in peers or environment. R1's later insistence that one should not blame one's influencers — "hindi mo naman sasabihin na sisisihin mo 'yong mga taong 'yon na kayo 'yong nagpakulong sa 'kin" — discloses a self-ownership that complicates the victim-of-environment narrative.

Read through Bronfenbrenner's ecological lens, this sub-theme reveals an active interplay between microsystem influences (peer groups) and individual agency rather than a one-way causal arrow from environment to child. The implication for rehabilitation design is significant: interventions that treat CICL exclusively as victims of structural forces risk misaligning with the moral-agentic identity participants themselves construct during rehabilitation. Programs that acknowledge entangled agency—neither absolving peers nor denying the child's own volition—may resonate more deeply with participants' self-understanding.

Sub-theme 1.2: Dual Phenomenology of Apprehension — Rupture at Entry, Rescue in Retrospect

A striking convergence emerged across the three participants in their narration of apprehension. In the immediate register of first entry, arrest was experienced as acute rupture: fear, confusion, sadness, and, in one case, active suicidal ideation. R1 disclosed that during his first days in custody, he briefly contemplated ending his life, describing the psychological battle in stark terms:

"Meron pa 'yong one time na nag-isip po ako na ba't nandito pa 'ko? Pwede ko naman kitilin 'yong buhay kung gusto ko eh… Pero iniisip ko ba't ako magpapakamatay? Wala naman akong ginawa. At saka 'yong parents ko do'n lang ako humuhugot ng lakas eh."
— R1, 17

R2 described the emotional confusion of entry as compound affect: "Nalungkot po ako kuya at natatakot naghalo-halo na yun kuya, yung lungkot at takot." R4, who entered custody without immediate peer support, recounted the isolation-induced depression of his first days: "Natakot po tapos nakaka depressed po kasi mag isa lang po ako." These accounts corroborate [1] documentation of anxiety, homesickness, and uncertainty as common emotional challenges among children in custodial settings, as well as the [12] observation that institutional environments can intensify isolation and distress in the initial period of confinement.

Yet a second, retrospective register layered upon this initial rupture. When asked to make sense of the events that brought them to rehabilitation, all three participants reframed their apprehension as a rescue from a worsening trajectory. R2 stated directly that "kung di ako nahuli ng mga pulis at kung di ako na kulong kuya, eh siguro mas malala pa ang sitwasyon ko ngayon." R4 articulated the same logic: "Siguro kuya mas lalo po lalala yung ugali ko kuya, baka nag nanakaw parin ako o mas mapapalala ang sitwasyon ko." R1, in his more extended narrative voice, summarized his retrospective self-understanding with the phrase that gives this theme its title: "Sa huli, napunta ako sa maling landas."

The two registers do not contradict; they layer upon each other within the same narrative and constitute a complex temporal phenomenology in which the meaning of a single event — apprehension — is transformed by the rehabilitation process itself. This finding provides empirical grounding for the restorative orientation articulated by [11] and embedded in Republic Act 9344. The law's emphasis on rehabilitation over punishment is, according to these accounts, confirmed from the child's own perspective: participants narrate the system as protective rather than punitive, albeit at the initial cost of acute emotional suffering. Read through Bronfenbrenner's chronosystem, the finding further illustrates how the same event is reinterpreted over developmental time as the child's interpretive capacity matures through immersion in rehabilitation programs.

Theme 2: "Kailangan Mong Magpakatatag" — The Sustained Struggle and Calibrated Engagement of Institutional Life

Where Theme 1 traced the entry phase, Theme 2 addresses the sustained daily phenomenology of rehabilitation. It responds most directly to the second research question, concerning the challenges participants encounter during the rehabilitation process. The theme comprises two sub-themes. The first captures the psychological and relational weight of confinement. The second discloses the heterogeneous modes in which participants engage with institutional structure and programming.

Sub-theme 2.1: Psychological Weight of Confinement and Separation from Family

Participants consistently identified the most difficult challenge of rehabilitation not as the structure of rules or the privations of custody per se, but as an internal battle against stress, depression, loneliness, and longing for family. R1 articulated this interior struggle with unusual reflective depth:

"Number one 'yong isip mo 'yong napakahirap talagang kontrolin 'yong stress 'yong depression pero hindi naman hadlang 'yon para mamuhay ka ng payapa dito. Siyempre kung magpapatalo ka eh wala… kailangan mong magpakatatag."
— R1, 17

R2 foregrounded physical and emotional distance from family as the principal source of suffering: "Napalayo po ako sa pamilya ko kuya, madalang lang po sila pumunta dito… kasi may trabaho sila." R4 emphasized chronic loneliness compounded by nighttime fear: "Mag isa lang ako syempre minsan lang po ako madalaw, mag isa po, nakaka iyak po at yun nga po nakakatakot pag mag isa po kuya." All three respondents identified nighttime — particularly after the evening lock-down — as the temporal fulcrum of distress. R1 described how this temporal pattern produced emotional breakdown: "After ng alas singko alas sais… Do'n mo na mararanasan 'yong tunay na pagkakakulong mo."

These findings confirm and extend documentation of emotional challenges among CICL and warning that custodial environments can inadvertently intensify isolation. The present study adds a phenomenologically specific observation: distress is not continuously distributed across the day but concentrates at temporal boundaries (night, times of isolation, periods without visitors). Programs that deliver psychosocial interventions exclusively during daytime activity hours may therefore miss the window during which emotional suffering is most acute. The finding also has implications for family engagement strategies: structural factors such as parental work obligations produce visitation patterns that are themselves a source of distress for CICL, suggesting that coordinated family-support mechanisms (e.g., transportation assistance, flexible visiting hours) warrant institutional attention.

Sub-theme 2.2: Calibrated Engagement with Institutional Structure and Programming

Participants occupy a continuum of engagement with daily routines and programs. At one end of this continuum, R1 described his participation as reflective and voluntary, framing routine activities as opportunities for self-reshaping:

"Daily routine namin dito siyempre part 'yon ng rehabilitation namin… 'di naman sapilitan 'yong pakikipag-join… nasasayo 'yon kung gusto mong may pagbabago… dito mo ulit hinuhubog 'yong sarili mo."
— R1, 17

R2's engagement took the form of passive compliance with religious programming: "Sinusunod na lang po lahat ng ano kuya, sinasalihan po namin 'yon tulad ng mga programa katulad ng magsimba." R4 articulated a third, instrumental mode motivated principally by the accumulation of certificates convertible into Good Conduct Time Allowance (GCTA) credits:

"Mga program po tas nagbibigay sila nang mga certificate, ALS, simba tuwing 99amin na magagamit sa GCTA mga naiipon 99aming na certificate… icoconvert yun lahat nang good time allowance 99aming dito."
— R4, 17

This heterogeneity is phenomenologically consequential: the same institutional activity (e.g., attending Sunday worship) produces qualitatively different interior experiences depending on the participant's interpretive frame. The finding corroborates [7] observation that the effectiveness of diversion and intervention programs depends not only on their formal design but also on how participants engage with them. It also extends [8] characterization of rehabilitation programming by introducing a typology of engagement modes that outcome evaluations focused exclusively on attendance or completion may otherwise obscure.

The implication is that program evaluation should complement quantitative attendance metrics with qualitative indicators of engagement mode, recognizing that voluntary, compliant, and instrumental participation may predict different long-term rehabilitative outcomes. This finding also answers [2] critique that juvenile justice interventions are commonly measured by procedural indicators while subjective experience remains underexplored; the present data provide one pathway for incorporating such subjective texture into program assessment.

Theme 3: "May Support System Ka Na" — Relational Ecologies as the Scaffolding of Change

The third theme addresses the fourth research question directly by disclosing how participants perceive and experience the support provided by family, peers, and professionals. Four sub-themes constitute this theme: family as an enduring anchor; institutional support that is perceived as genuine but unevenly felt; spiritual and peer communities as sites of transformation; and the explicit primacy participants assign to mental and spiritual support over material provision. Collectively, these sub-themes disclose that rehabilitation is not experienced as a solitary project but as embeddedness in layered relational ecologies — a finding that coheres closely with Bronfenbrenner's microsystem and mesosystem levels.

Sub-theme 3.1: Family as Enduring Anchor Across Physical and Emotional Distance

Family emerged across all three participants as the most consistent relational support. Familial bonds were narrated as preserved despite the offense and, paradoxically, revealed more clearly through the experience of confinement. R1 described the endurance of his family relationship:

"Di mo sila nakikita, namimiss mo sila at kahit nangyari naman yun di sila nag tanim ng galit saakin despite nga sa nangyari… di parin nasira ang relasyon namin ng aking pamilya lagi parin sila nandyan para saakin."
— R1, 17

R2's account disclosed an unexpected phenomenological inversion: incarceration itself rendered his parents' love more perceptible than it had been before. "No'ng nakulong ako mas naramdaman ko pang mahal nila ako kuya kasi no'ng nasa labas kasi ako eh 'di ko sila pinapansin kuya, hindi naman nila ako tinakwil." R4's account emphasized both the stability of his family's posture toward him and the difficulty of physical separation: "Okay naman po yung sitwasyon namin ng pamilya ko sa akin po, tas siyempre mahirap mahiwalay sa pamilya."

These findings resonate with [8] identification of family participation as a critical determinant of rehabilitation outcomes and with [4] emphasis on family-centered interventions. They also provide an important qualification to literature that treats custodial settings as uniformly corrosive of family bonds: for at least one of these participants, apprehension produced an enhanced rather than diminished sense of parental love. Within Bronfenbrenner's framework, the microsystem of family emerges here as the most resilient ecological layer — the one that survives and, in some cases, is strengthened by institutional intervention. This finding argues for family-inclusive rehabilitation planning that actively facilitates communication between the child and caregivers, particularly given R2's and R4's reports of limited visiting frequency due to parental work obligations.

Sub-theme 3.2: Institutional Support — Perceived Genuine but Unevenly Felt

Staff support was described as multi-domain, covering emotional, physical, financial, moral, legal, and spiritual provision. R1 articulated the holistic character of this support:

"Emotional ng pangangailangan din. Hindi lang sa physical, lahat ng financial. Lahat tumutulong sila sa anumang aspeto dito. Lalo na kung sa religious ini-enhance nila 'yong isang tao."
— R1, 17

R2 emphasized the moral-instructional and comforting roles of staff: "Pag-aalaga nila sa 'min kuya pinagsasabihan kami na matutong gumalang sa nakakatanda… ina-advise kami at binibigyan ng comfort kuya." He further described staff as proactively attentive: "Tinutulungan nila ako kaya nararamdaman ko naman na kahit hindi ako humingi ng tulong… sila 'yong kusang lumalapit sa 'kin para tulungan ako." R4 highlighted legal and educational dimensions of staff support, noting staff accompaniment to court and the prayerful investment of one staff member: "Pagsama po sa amin sa korte may binibigay pang suporta sa pag-aaral at moral recovery program… pinagdadasal po kami ni Ma'am Gina na sana makalabas na po kami dito."

A counter-narrative must, however, be preserved rather than smoothed over. R4, elsewhere in his interview, reported that he did not feel fully understood: "Wala naman po ako na tanggap na tulong po, parang di ko po ramdam po kuya yung parang nauunawaan kami." This divergent account does not negate the majority narrative of perceived genuine and proactive care; rather, it discloses that institutional warmth is a relational achievement distributed unevenly across individual children rather than an institutional guarantee. Methodologically, the preservation of this counter-narrative follows the reflexive and sensitivity principles articulated by [18] in interpretative phenomenological analysis, which caution against premature harmonization of participant accounts.

The finding emphasizes therapeutic and structured support in juvenile rehabilitation and corroborates [2]'s call for attention to the developmental and psychosocial needs of the child. It also underscores the importance, within [8] framework, of continuous staff training and reflective practice so perceived understanding extends to every child, not merely the majority. Within Bronfenbrenner's ecological framework, this sub-theme discloses the microsystem interaction between child and institutional caregiver as variably effective — the same exosystem (institutional policy and resourcing) produces different microsystem experiences depending on relational factors that policy alone cannot guarantee.

Sub-theme 3.3: Spiritual Life and Peer Kinship as Crucibles of Change

Prayer, Sunday Mass, the moral recovery program, and close peer friendships were narrated as the principal sites within which transformation actually occurred. R1 described how prayer became an anchor of spiritual growth within the facility: "Natuto din akong manalangin dito… nando'n 'yong spiritual growth mo na… Hinahubog na ng husto." R2 similarly described church attendance and the moral recovery program as formative:

"Pagsimba po kuya gano'n. tinuruan po kaming magsimba. Kung magsisimba talagang mauunawaan mo po 'yong sarili mo… meron kaming moral recovery program na maghapon na tinuturuan kami."
— R2, 16

Peer relationships served a distinct but equally important function, particularly as a release valve for affect that would otherwise be dangerous if suppressed. R1 articulated this with phenomenological specificity:

"Natuklasan 'yong tunay na family 'yong word na sasabihin mo sa sarili mo na brother mo na 'yong isang taong 'to… kung 'yong galit mo eh hindi mo ma-express diyan sasabog ka. Kailangan mo ng isang tao na mapagkakatiwalaan mo."
— R1, 17

These findings align with [16] observation that effective juvenile rehabilitation programs combine structured routines with therapeutic and relational support. They also qualify the general literature on peer influence in juvenile justice, which tends to treat peer relationships as risk factors [9]. Within the rehabilitation setting, the present study shows that peer relationships can function protectively as surrogate family structures that enable affective regulation and emotional expression otherwise difficult within institutional hierarchies. Within Bronfenbrenner's framework, this sub-theme reveals a reconfigured microsystem in which peers become a source of support rather than delinquency-promoting pressure—suggesting that healthy peer bonding within the facility is not merely tolerable but actively protective.

Sub-theme 3.4: The Primacy of Mental-Spiritual Support Over Material Provision

When asked directly to weigh the types of support received, participants converged on privileging mental and spiritual support over material or financial provision. R1 articulated the hierarchy with unusual clarity:

"Binibigay nila dito 'yong financially medical allowance gano'n lahat… Pero 'yung most important, 'yung mental and spiritual , yun 'yong pinaghuhugutan mo… kung mayro'n kaming pera mababaliw ka naman dito 'di wala din lang."
— R1, 17

R2 confirmed the sufficiency of institutional provision across both material and non-material dimensions: "lagi nila kaming tinutulungan financially, sa pananalangin, at sa mga advice kuya di naman sila nagkulang sa amin." R4 specifically highlighted weekly church attendance as the most important ongoing spiritual support: "Meron po yung makapagsimba po pag kalabas kada linggo po nakakatulong po sa spiritual po namin."

This hierarchy of support needs — mental-spiritual first, material second — carries direct policy implications. It suggests that under the Juvenile Justice and Welfare Act (Republic Act 9344) and the [3] programmatic guidelines, the weighting of inputs should be calibrated toward counseling, spiritual development, and values formation even in contexts where material resources are constrained. This finding corroborates the [8] framework by listing psychological counseling, values formation, and spiritual development as core components of rehabilitation, while adding phenomenological grounding for their primacy from the child's perspective. Within Bronfenbrenner's framework, this sub-theme illustrates how macrosystem-level cultural values (the centrality of spirituality in Philippine youth experience) interact with microsystem provision to produce a felt hierarchy of institutional care.

Theme 4: "Hinuhubog Niya Ulit Ako" — The Reconstitution of the Self Through Rehabilitation

The fourth theme addresses the third research question by disclosing how rehabilitation has influenced participants' personal growth and behavioral transformation. This theme comprises three sub-themes: moral-spiritual reformation, affective and practical virtue formation, and emergent positive identity. These sub-themes trace interior change along distinct but converging axes, all of which participants describe as being "reshaped" (hinuhubog) through the rehabilitation experience.

Sub-theme 4.1: Moral-Spiritual Reformation — Humility, Prayer, and Respect

A core axis of transformation involved shedding pride, learning prayer, and practicing respect. R1 framed this transformation theologically, locating the agency of reshaping partly beyond the institution:

"Nawala sa 'kin 'yong pride… ako eh hot-tempered ako eh sa labas… 'yong time na hinuli ako ni God. Pinunta ako dito sa kuwan sa kulungan… kinulong niya 'ko. Do'n hinuhubog niya ulit ako."
— R1, 17

R2 and R4 described parallel acquisitions of respect and prayer practices. R2 noted: "Natutunan ko maging marespeto kuya at nag dasal kuya, dati kasi di ako marunong mag dasal pero ngayon natutunan ko mag dasal kuya." R4 described a similar cultivation of virtues: "Paggalang sa mga gwardiya sa mga kasama dito kuya, naturuan rin kami magdasal at maging masinop at manglinis sa selda."

The theological framing that attributes reshaping to divine agency is not merely a pious addition to participants' accounts; it functions phenomenologically as a meaning-making resource that situates transformation within a cosmology larger than the institution itself. This aligns with [8] 's inclusion of spiritual development as a core rehabilitation component and with the Philippine cultural-religious context discussed in the local literature on CICL rehabilitation. Programs that support, rather than compete with, this theological self-understanding may achieve deeper alignment with participants' interpretive frames. Lived experience cannot be fully understood apart from the meaning structures through which participants articulate it.

Sub-theme 4.2: Affective Regulation and Practical Virtue Formation

A second axis concerned the regulation of affect — particularly temper — and the acquisition of practical virtues, including cleanliness, industriousness, abstinence from vices, and the containment of mischief. R2 reported: "Maging marespeto po ako sa mga kapwa ko kuya. Dati pa eh mainitin ulo ko kuya pero gayon di na kuya." R4 described a multi-axis self-improvement:

"Opo yung pag iwas po sa mga alak tapos sigarilyo tapos natanggal ko naman na po yung pagkasungit ko. Ah tapos tumaba naman ko Dito dati sobrang payat ko."
— R4, 17

R4 also described how institutional chores cultivated industriousness: "Paglinis nang selda pag walis, hugas nang mga plato… sa labas po di naman po ako marunong mag linis tas mag hugas kumbaga natuto ako maging masipag." R2 captured the containment function of institutional structure: "Medyo makulit kasi ako dati sa labas… pero dito eh kahit ga'no kakulit dapat 'di mo dalhin 'yong ugali mo sa labas dito."

The consistency of temper-reduction across all three participants is phenomenologically noteworthy. Filipino cultural-linguistic usage associates a hot temper with "mainit na ulo" — a literally heated head — and participants described their transformation as a cooling of the passions, a literalization of the idiom. The finding corresponds to the values-formation and life-skills-training components articulated in [8] programming and to the restorative-justice emphasis on character development rather than mere incapacitation [11]. Read through Bronfenbrenner's framework, these affective and practical virtues reflect microsystem-level learning — the acquisition of pro-social behaviors through daily institutional routine — that is expected to travel with the child back into community settings upon reintegration.

Sub-theme 4.3: Emergent Identity — From Delinquent to Leader-Learner

For at least one participant, transformation extended beyond virtue-acquisition to a positive reclamation of identity. R1 described an emergent leadership role within the facility and a reinvestment in the learner identity:

"Ako kasi 'yong isang leader do'n, eh. Binibigyan ko din sila ng moral na pangangailangan kumbaga. Siyempre kung kailangan ikaw na team leader na 'di mo kayang i-handle 'yong sarili mo. Ba't mo ma-ha-handle 'tong mga 'to?"
— R1, 17

This sub-theme is anchored principally, though not exclusively, in R1's account. Methodologically, phenomenological analysis accommodates salient individual textures[14]; a single but deeply developed account of upward identity reformation remains analytically valuable and should be read not as an outlier to be minimized but as evidence of one trajectory that rehabilitation can enable. The finding qualifies [6] observation that stigma undermines reintegration: at least for some CICL, the rehabilitation setting itself can produce positive identity trajectories (leadership, learning) that function as protective resources against future stigma. Within Bronfenbrenner's framework, this sub-theme discloses how microsystem roles assigned within the facility (e.g., peer team leader) can re-socialize the child into pro-social identities that carry into the reintegration phase.

Theme 5: "Pasok sa Tenga, Labas sa Kabila" — Outward Orientation to Community and the Future

The fifth theme addresses the fifth research question by disclosing participants' hopes and aspirations after completing rehabilitation, and it partly addresses the fourth research question by clarifying how they anticipate navigating community reception. This theme comprises two sub-themes: a shared coping grammar for anticipated community stigma and aspirations rooted in education completion and familial reciprocity.

Sub-theme 5.1: A Shared Coping Grammar for Anticipated Community Stigma

All three participants articulated a convergent idiomatic strategy for dealing with anticipated community judgment upon reintegration. The strategy is captured in the shared Filipino idiom "pasok sa tenga, labas sa kabilang tenga" — in one ear, out the other — which R4 invoked explicitly by referring to R1's earlier articulation. R2 expressed the same strategy more directly:

"Hindi ko naman sila pinapansin kasi kapag pinapansin mo lang sila mas lalong ina-anuhan nila kaya hayaan n'yo na lang sila kuya… pasok dito, labas."
— R2, 16

This strategy is supported by two complementary cognitive anchors: self-worth grounded in internalized knowledge of one's own conduct (R2: "alam ko naman na ginawa ko… hindi naman ikakababa ng pagkatao ko") and attentional focus on future goals (R4: "focus nalang po ako sa goal ko… Yung makapag tapos sa pag aaral at matulungan ko nalang magulang ko"). R1, in the most developed statement of the strategy, distinguished between the inevitability of external judgment and the agency of the child's response: "Hindi maiwasan 'yong mga mata ng mga tao na nasa ilabas na judgment… nasa sarili mo na kung gugustuhin mo ulit ibalik 'yong sarili mong gano'n… Magbago ka."

This finding corroborates [6] identification of stigma as a barrier to reintegration, but it also discloses something that the prior literature has not fully articulated: a culturally specific coping grammar shared across participants. The grammar is not an individual idiosyncrasy but a resource embedded in Filipino linguistic and cultural practice. This has important implications for reintegration programming. Rather than attempting to import externally designed resilience frameworks, reintegration support may more effectively scaffold and reinforce this existing idiomatic resource — for example, by helping participants identify and strengthen the self-worth anchor and the goal-focus practices that the idiom presupposes. Within Bronfenbrenner's framework, this sub-theme discloses an interaction between macrosystem-level cultural resources (idiom, folk psychology) and individual-level coping strategies that the exosystem (rehabilitation programs) can amplify through explicit recognition.

Sub-theme 5.2: Aspirations Rooted in Education Completion and Familial Reciprocity

Future orientations converged on education completion as both a personal redemption and an instrument of reciprocal family provision. R1 articulated an almost motivational framing: "Continue pa rin 'yong pag-aaral ko siyempre ang laking bagay 'yong edukasyon… mas maganda 'yong may pinag-aralan ka… 'yung the greatest revenge that you will give to someone is success." R2 tied educational aspiration to explicit reciprocity toward his parents:

"Itutuloy ko po ang pag-aaral ko sa labas kasi junior high lang natapos ko kuya, gusto ko rin makapag tapos kuya para matulungan ko magulang ko kuya."
— R2, 16

R4 articulated a concrete career aspiration linked to the same logic of family provision: "Makapagtapos rin po nang pagaaral tumaguyod sa pamilya ko. Gusto ko po mag seaman." Relapse prevention was framed across all three respondents as disciplined peer selection paired with self-ownership of past choices, rather than externalized blame. R1's formulation is emblematic: "kailangan mong tumuklas ng mga bagong kaibigan na magiging in good influence na. Para hindi ka na malihis ulit." R2 echoed this with explicit peer-discrimination intent: "pipiliin ko na lang kung sinong mga sasamahan ko."

These findings cohere with the restorative-justice literature on reintegration [11], [15] and with the Philippine cultural logic of familial reciprocity (utang na loob) that pervades [4] analysis of youth development. The reciprocal structure — education not only for individual advancement but as provision for family — locates aspiration within a relational matrix that individual-achievement frameworks may miss. Educational reintegration programs informed by this finding might emphasize not only return to school but also the relational purposes that make return meaningful from the participant's own perspective. Within Bronfenbrenner's framework, this sub-theme discloses microsystem-level (family) and exosystem-level (education system) integration mediated by chronosystem considerations as the child anticipates future transitions.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

From the findings summarized above, the following conclusions are drawn.

1. Rehabilitation, as lived by CICL in Solano, is not principally a punitive experience but a phenomenologically complex transformative process in which early rupture is reinterpreted through time into a narrative of rescue. This interior reinterpretation provides empirical grounding, from the child's perspective, for the restorative orientation embedded in Republic Act 9344 and the operational guidelines of the Juvenile Justice and Welfare Council.
2. The most acute challenges of rehabilitation are not the structural privations of custody but the interior psychological battle, the relational strain of family distance, and the temporal concentration of distress at night. Existing programmatic frameworks (DSWD, 2022) that emphasize psychological counseling and family involvement are thus confirmed in their centrality by participants' own accounts, though the temporal distribution of distress warrants fresh attention.
3. Participants engage rehabilitation programs in qualitatively distinct modes. Program evaluation that relies on attendance or completion metrics alone risks obscuring important differences in interior engagement that may predict different long-term outcomes. Qualitative indicators of engagement mode — voluntary, compliant, or instrumental — should complement quantitative program measures.
4. Family constitutes the most resilient ecological layer for CICL, surviving and, in some cases, strengthened by the experience of apprehension. Rehabilitation outcomes are significantly mediated by the quality and frequency of family engagement. Structural barriers to family participation — such as parental work obligations — constitute a persistent point of vulnerability in the current system.
5. Institutional warmth is a relational achievement distributed unevenly across individual children rather than an institutional guarantee. The preservation of the counter-narrative from one participant, who reported not feeling fully understood, establishes that well-resourced programs can still fail to reach particular children. Individualized relational monitoring is therefore essential to the integrity of institutional care.
6. Participants privilege mental-spiritual support over material provision in their own hierarchy of valued care. This hierarchy has direct implications for the weighting of program inputs under RA 9344 and JJWC guidelines, particularly in contexts where material resources are constrained. Counseling, spiritual development, and values formation constitute the irreducible core of rehabilitation as experienced from within.
7. Community stigma is real and anticipated, but CICL possess a culturally specific coping grammar that they bring to reintegration. This grammar is a resource to be scaffolded by reintegration programs rather than replaced by externally imported resilience frameworks. Effective reintegration support will recognize, reinforce, and strengthen the idiomatic and relational practices participants themselves articulate.
8. Aspirations are relationally anchored. Education completion is experienced not solely as individual advancement but as reciprocal provision for family. Reintegration programs that frame educational return in relational rather than purely individualistic terms are likely to resonate more deeply with participants' own motivational architecture.

Recommendations

Based on the conclusions, the following recommendations are offered to stakeholder groups in Chapter I, with emphasis on ensuring the court pillar implements speedy trials for CICL cases.

1. For Children in Conflict with the Law (CICL). CICL are encouraged to continue active engagement with rehabilitation programs, recognizing that the interior battle against stress and loneliness is an expected and traversable part of the process. Participants are particularly encouraged to use peer relationships and spiritual practices as legitimate sites for emotional expression and transformation, and to invest in learner identity as a resource for reintegration. Ownership of past choices, paired with disciplined peer selection going forward, is the recurring logic participants articulate, and it warrants explicit reinforcement within the facility's peer community.
2. For Families. Families are encouraged to maintain consistent emotional support and open communication throughout the rehabilitation period, recognizing that their presence and expressed affection are phenomenologically central to the child's survival of the initial confinement period and to the child's eventual reintegration. Where work obligations constrain the frequency of visits, families are encouraged to pursue alternative forms of contact (letters, scheduled calls) and to coordinate with rehabilitation staff to ensure that the child perceives continuity of familial presence.
3. For the Community. Community members, leaders, and local organizations are encouraged to become more reflective about the role of community reception in CICL reintegration. Because participants anticipate and prepare for community stigma before they leave the facility, community-level stigma reduction — through awareness campaigns, barangay-level dialogues, and involvement of community-based organizations — can meaningfully reduce the reintegration burden. Faith-based communities, given the centrality of spirituality in participants' transformation accounts, are particularly well-positioned to provide non-stigmatizing spaces of welcome.
4. For School Administrators. School administrators are encouraged to develop inclusive return-to-school protocols that accommodate CICL without publicizing their rehabilitation history and that provide academic catch-up support for the period of educational disruption. Given that education completion functions, in participants' own accounts, as both personal redemption and family provision, schools play a particularly consequential role in the reintegration process. School guidance offices should coordinate with the Municipal Social Welfare and Development Office on continuity of care, particularly in the initial weeks following reintegration.
5. For the Local Government Unit and the Municipal Social Welfare and Development Office. The LGU of Solano and the MSWDO are encouraged to calibrate program inputs toward mental-spiritual and counseling components in accordance with participants' own hierarchy of valued support, while continuing to provide adequate material and legal provisions. Three specific operational recommendations follow from the findings. First, given that distress concentrates at night, evening-hours psychosocial support — whether in the form of trained staff availability, structured peer support, or accessible spiritual practice — warrants institutional attention. Second, given that institutional warmth is unevenly felt, an individualized relational monitoring practice should be established so that children who do not perceive themselves as understood are identified and supported early. Third, given that family engagement is mediated by structural barriers, the MSWDO is encouraged to explore facilitative measures such as flexible visiting hours, transportation assistance, and family-child communication platforms.

6. For Future Researchers. Future researchers are encouraged to extend the present phenomenological inquiry along several directions. First, comparative studies across multiple municipalities in Nueva Vizcaya and Cagayan Valley would test the transferability of the present findings and disclose context-specific variations in rehabilitation experience. Second, longitudinal follow-up with reintegrated participants would examine the durability of the transformations reported here and the real-world operation of the coping grammar participants articulate. Third, gender-disaggregated studies would examine whether the themes identified in this study operate similarly for female CICL, given the inclusion of the gender question in the interview guide. Fourth, mixed-method studies combining phenomenological depth with quantitative engagement-mode indicators would operationalize the continuum of engagement disclosed in Sub-theme 2.2. Fifth, studies of the institutional side — staff perspectives, training practices, and supervisory systems — would triangulate and enrich the child-centered findings presented here, particularly with respect to the counter-narrative preserved in Sub-theme 3.2.

AI DECLARATION STATEMENT

AI-supported tools helped with grammar and structure in creating this article. No AI tools were used to collect, analyze, or interpret data; all authors are credited for their academic contributions.

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