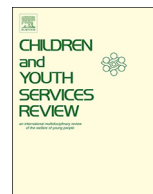




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## Residential education as an alternative for promoting psychosocial and behavioral outcomes among high-risk young Macanese males



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### A B S T R A C T

Residential education which integrates both home and school life aims to help youth who are socially or economically disadvantaged. Using Macanese school samples, the study analyzes the demographic background, personal characteristics, and behavioral problems of current and graduate boarding students, together with a control group of students from an ordinary school.

A sample of 246 male students (69 current boarders, 37 boarding graduates, and 140 controls) was subjected to statistical analysis. Descriptive analyses and logistic regressions were conducted to explore the risk profile of boarding students relative to control students, who are from an ordinary school, and to identify the protective factors that associate with positive transitions.

The results indicate that the boarding students commonly had problematic family backgrounds and showed higher rates of behavioral problems than the control students. Contrary to our expectations, boarding students reported higher levels of school commitment and self-efficacy. The regression results indicate that being a boarding student is associated with higher peer attachment and greater self-efficacy. In addition, boarding graduates reported less involvement in violent crime and maintained high self-efficacy and school commitment after leaving residential education.

Adolescents receiving residential education exhibited low incidence of behavioral problems and possessed essential coping capabilities to minimize negative life events. Our findings suggest that residential education may be a promising means to alleviate psychosocial and behavioral maladjustment and to promote positive change among high-risk youth.

### 1. Introduction

Residential education is regarded as a remedial educational program for at-risk youth in the United States (Jones & Lansdverk, 2006; Lee & Barth, 2009), the United Kingdom (Morrison, 2007), and Northern Europe (Jahnukainen, 2007). The term “residential education” broadly refers to the education provided in residential settings, often called “boarding schools” or “boarding residences.” Residential education is a 24-h out-of-home placement that integrates both home and school life for youth who are socially or economically disadvantaged (Lee & Barth, 2009).

A considerable number of residential programs for troubled youth, such as foster care, residential treatment, and institutional/residential care has been used an alternative to mainstream education.<sup>1</sup> Typically,

young people in residential settings present with multiple externalizing and internalizing symptoms, including mental health problems (Duppong Hurlley et al., 2009; Erol, Simsek, & Münir, 2010), substance abuse (Kepper, Monshouwer, Van Dorsselaer, & Vollebergh, 2011), severe behavioral problems (Bernedo, Salas, Fuentes, & García-Martín, 2014; Vanschoonlandt, Vanderfaillie, Van Holen, De Maeyer, & Robberechts, 2013), and academic difficulties (Scholte, 1997; Trout, Hagaman, Casey, Reid, & Epstein, 2008). Many come from problematic family environments featuring troubled family relations (Frensch & Cameron, 2002; Lee & Barth, 2009), divorced parents (Scholte, 1997), and parental incarceration (Hussey & Guo, 2002; Lee & Thompson, 2008), and have been exposed to abuse and neglect (Hussey & Guo, 2002; James, Roesch, & Zhang, 2012).

Over the years there has been extensive debate on residential

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<sup>1</sup> There are many terms used in residential programs. Generally, foster care provides residential family care for children who cannot be adequately cared for by their families. Residential treatment encompasses a variety of facilities in which children and youth reside in a nonfamily setting that provides comprehensive inpatient mental health treatment and/or substance abuse services. Institutional/residential care refers to the nonfamily setting that provides care and supported accommodation for children and youth who do not need intensive in-house mental health services. Details on the different residential programs can be referred to Walter and Petr (2007).

programs (Barth, 2005; Souverein, Van der Helm, & Stams, 2013). Some researchers are negative about residential programs due to their lack of cost-effectiveness (DeSena et al., 2005), their facilitation of students' association with delinquent peers (Dishion, McCord, & Poulin, 1999), and students' high levels of failure to adapt personally, socially, and academically (Manso, García-Baamonde, Alonso, & Barona, 2011). Nevertheless, residential education differs from residential treatment in significant ways (Lee & Barth, 2009). Based on a “medical model” (Segal, Morral, & Stevens, 2014), residential treatment is short-term and provides high-intensity clinical treatment. Residential education, on the contrary, is long-term and academically oriented. Residential education programs focus on cultivating youth development, while providing a low level of mental health services (Lee & Barth, 2009).

Although the effectiveness of residential care has been widely discussed (James, 2011; Pecora & English, 2016), surprisingly few research studies assess the residential education conducted in boarding schools (Jahnukainen, 2007). Moreover, follow-up studies have shown that high-risk adolescents who have left residential institutions perform poorly when they reenter the community (Bullis, Yovanoff, & Havel, 2004; Jahnukainen, 2007). Research on positive institution-to-community transitions is relatively scarce. Especially regarding deinstitutionalization (Jenson & Howard, 1998), it is important to examine the practice of residential education for high-risk youth in different cultural settings. The residential education model is comparatively new in Asian countries, and no study has been conducted in the Chinese context.

To fill this gap, they study seeks to examine the risk profile of boarding students attending residential education in a Macanese setting, where circumstances are very different from Western settings. We are inspired to examine whether boarding experience is related to the positive change in the development of high-risk youth. The study explores the influence of residential education by proposing two research questions: (1) what are the demographic background, personal characteristics, and behavioral problems of Macanese students in residential education in comparison to students in mainstream education? and (2) what are the protective factors related to the positive transition of high-risk youth? The study is exploratory in nature and intends to provide implications that residential education can complement the current system of child welfare services.

## 2. Methods

### 2.1. Research site

The current study was conducted in Macao, a coastal city in southern China. Macao was a colony under Portuguese administration for > 400 years (1557–1999).

It is now a special administrative region (SAR) of China that enjoys a high degree of autonomy. Macao has a population of approximately 653,100 (Statistics and Census Service, 2017), of whom 92.3% are ethnic Chinese (Statistics and Census Service, 2011). Because more than four centuries of Portuguese rule, Macao has served as a meeting place for Eastern and Western cultures. Nowadays Macanese people have been accustomed to balance their Western modernized lifestyle with traditional Chinese cultural and practices (Wei, 2013). While the unemployment rate for young people in Macao is < 2%, it does not necessary mean that youth problem is not a major issue and the pressure to perform well in primary and secondary schools is often the top concern among young Macanese and their families (Chui, Cheung, Wong, Sze, & Chin, 2016; Wong & Chui, 2017).

This study is indeed first of its kind to examine in what ways residential education can promote positive outcomes among a selected group of troubled young people who are not able to adjust well to mainstream education in Macao. The site of investigation of this study was a male-only boarding school. The school is accredited through the Macao Education Bureau and consists of six primary and secondary

grades. The school provides small classes (20 or fewer students), meaning that the student-teacher ratio is lower than in mainstream schools in Macao. Boarding students are required to live in the school dormitory during the five-and-a-half-day school week. They can return home to live with family during weekends. The school provides a family-style living environment. Each student is a member of a “boarding family” of approximately 10 students, supervised by houseparents and social workers. Hence, boarding students are socialized to family living rather than institutional life (Lee & Barth, 2009). Many of the students come from ‘broken’ or dysfunctional families where parents cannot provide them with adequate care and supervision, and most have exhibited behavioral problems and psychosocial maladjustments. Some students were placed in boarding school due to encounters with law enforcement agencies. The primary goal of the boarding school is prevention education based on reason, religion, and charity. With particular emphasis on helping young people in need, the boarding student is educated to become a better person, in terms of moral, intellectual, physical, and aesthetic development. In addition, a comparison sample of mainstream students was recruited from a Macanese boys’ school. Different from boarding school where students live as well as learn, mainstream students attend school during the day and return their home after school.

### 2.2. Procedure and participants

Ethics approval was obtained from The University of Hong Kong’s Human Research Ethics Committee. Upon approval from both schools’ administrators, parental and student consent were first obtained, with a response rate of 95%. Anonymous questionnaires were administered by trained research assistants to consenting participants in a classroom setting between December 2011 and March 2012. The duration to complete the questionnaire was approximately 30 min. All participants are ethnic Chinese. The full sample consists of three groups of students: 69 current students who are attending boarding school ( $M = 14.85$  years,  $SD = 1.54$ ), 37 graduate students who have left the boarding school ( $M = 20.75$  years,  $SD = 3.64$ ), and 140 control students who are in a mainstream school ( $M = 13.86$  years,  $SD = 1.22$ ).

### 2.3. Measures

#### 2.3.1. Self-efficacy scale

The Generalized Perceived Self-efficacy Scale (GSES) was first developed by Schwarzer (1993) and later translated into Chinese by Zhang and Schwarzer (1995). The GSES contains ten items that measure generalized self-efficacy, or beliefs about one’s general ability to perform the desired behaviors in various situations. Example items include “I am confident that I could deal efficiently with unexpected events” and “I can remain calm when facing difficulties because I can rely on my coping abilities.” Students were asked to rate each item on a 4-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (*Not at all true*) to 4 (*Exactly true*). The higher the score, the higher the degree of self-efficacy. Adequate Cronbach’s  $\alpha$  values were reported in the present study: with 0.83 for current students, 0.89 for graduate students, and 0.81 for control students.

#### 2.3.2. Social bonds scale

The original social bonds scale was developed by Chapple, McQuillan, and Berdahl (2005) and later translated into Chinese by Chui and Chan (2011, 2012). Social bonds with significant others, such as parents, peers, teachers, and legal authorities, can prevent adolescents from engaging in delinquent behavior. The social bonds scale in the current study had four subscales—four items capturing parental attachment (e.g. “I share my thoughts and feelings with my mother.”), two capturing peer attachment (e.g. “I respect my best friend’s opinion about the important things in life”), three capturing school commitment (e.g. “I try hard in school”), and four capturing belief in the legal system

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