

Relationships Matter: The Role Transition Specialists Play in Youth's Reentry From the Juvenile Justice System

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Abstract

Increasing engagement to school, employment, and community are strong predictors of reducing recidivism for youth involved in the juvenile justice system. This study examined what occurs at reentry upon leaving a youth correctional setting. This study comprised of qualitative semi-structured interviews of transition specialists (TSs; $n = 7$) and young offenders ($n = 8$) who participated in a 4-year reentry project in the Pacific Northwest. A total of 21 (13 TS and eight youth) interviews were thematically coded. Findings from this study included the important role of the TS in supporting a youth's school, family, and community reentry. Key themes are described around the services to support employment, school engagement, and independent living during a youth's reentry into a school setting.

Keywords

juvenile justice, engagement, transition specialist, adolescents

According to the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (OJJDP), on a given day in 2015 approximately 48,000 juveniles were held within a juvenile residential placement facility (OJJDP, 2017). Other figures estimated up to 60,000 youth are incarcerated on any given day in the United States (Council of State Governments Justice Center [CSGJC], 2015). The vast majority of youth involved in the juvenile justice system are male, with females making up approximately 15% of the overall population. Minority youth compared with White youth had a national placement rate of 2.7 to 1 (OJJDP, 2017).

Youth with disabilities are another population of youth that have even greater overrepresentation in the juvenile justice system. Quinn et al. (2005) found the average percentage of youth with disabilities across the United States involved in the juvenile justice system was approximately 33%. In a more recent review, it was found that the percent of youth receiving special education services varied widely (30%–80%) depending on the state (U.S. Department of Education, 2014). Specifically, Quinn et al. (2005), reported youth with emotional disturbance and specific learning disability accounted for the vast majority of youth involved in the juvenile justice system (47.7% and 38.6%, respectively). Compared with the national average of youth receiving special education services in a school setting at the same time, the rate of youth

with disabilities in the juvenile justice system was four times greater (Quinn et al., 2005).

Another concern is youth recidivism. Although there is a lack of consistent national reporting on youth recidivism, studies reported that 45% to slightly more than half of youth offenders reoffend within 1 year (Harris et al., 2009; Wilson et al., 2003). Trends also revealed that youth involved in the juvenile justice system are more likely to reoffend as adults. National Research Council (1986) reported that between 31% and 71% of juvenile offenders graduate to adult crime. In a more recent study, analysis of recidivism rates into adult crime in one state was estimated to be 41% by the time a youth turned 25 (Aizer & Doyle, 2015).

Findings from research suggest youth involved in the juvenile justice system also experienced a multitude of poorer educational outcomes, such as disengagement and dropout (Keith & Mccray, 2002). Furthermore, a recent literature review on reentry practices highlighted the broad ranges of barriers that youth face during the reentry process

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including stigma, school personnel attitudes, administrative issues with paperwork, as well as attendance and enrollment procedures, and transferring of credits (Kubek et al., 2020). With consideration to the barriers youth experience during their reentry, increased direct supportive and positive engagement with school, employment, and community was found to be a strong predictor of reducing recidivism and reoffending in youth who previously were involved with the juvenile justice system (Bullis et al., 2002). The Every Student Succeeds Act (2015) increased the responsibility of the correctional education site and the local education agency to support reentry into the community. This reauthorization strengthened requirements for states to provide stronger protections for students in correctional education programs, and for youth returning to school in their designated home community (i.e., reentry planning, credit transfers, graduation).

In 2015, the CSGJC reported only 11 states had a dedicated education liaison to help facilitate the reentry transition, and in nearly half of states, no single government agency was responsible for ensuring a successful youth transition to education or employment. Furthermore, results of the national survey indicated that over one third of states automatically reenrolled youth who have been incarcerated into an alternative education setting, “which often do not meet state curricular and performance standards and suffer from lower graduation rates than traditional public schools” (CSGJC, 2015, p. 11).

Dishion and Patterson (2006) theorized an ecological framework of antisocial behavior. In this particular framework, the individual is in the center and the systems they interact with are framed around them. Dishion and Patterson (2006) posited that increasing self-regulation can be a mechanism to increase resilience, while at the same time resisting antisocial behavior. Unruh (n.d.) adapted this model specifically for youth that have come into contact with the juvenile justice system. Within the adapted framework, youth navigate relationships and interactions with people including peers, partners, families, employers, and parole officers, but must also navigate schools, homelife, community, workplace, and the juvenile justice system. All of these factors are then nested within the cultural context in which these systems and interactions operate.

Current Practices

In recent years, a stronger push to identify practices that help support increased engagement of youth returning into the community from the juvenile justice system has occurred. Rehabilitation-focused programs to prevent recidivism are increasingly implemented, rather than the disciplinary alternative (McCarthy et al., 2016). Lipsey (2009) conducted a meta-analysis on the characteristics of interventions that facilitated a reduction in recidivism. Lipsey suggested three

categories strongly associated with intervention effects to reduce recidivism including, the type of treatment, dosage and quality of the treatment, and the individuals receiving the treatment. Lipsey further iterated the quality of implementation of an intervention may be the strongest predictor to reduce recidivism, compared with the effectiveness of the intervention or the unique characteristics of the individuals receiving the intervention. Furthermore, meta-analytic results indicated disciplinary approaches were less effective than counseling (i.e., individual, family, or peer mentoring) and skill building (i.e., behavior, cognitive behavioral, social skills) treatment approaches in reducing recidivism.

While intervention types defined by Lipsey (2009) can help support intervention development and implementation, other research has focused on identifying best practices to engage youth in a rapid manner, which in the case of young offenders, requires collaborative practices across agencies. Mathur et al. (2017) published research-based practices for reintegrating students with emotional and behavioral disorder (EBD) from the juvenile justice system. The authors outlined practices that should be implemented between the juvenile justice and education systems immediately (i.e., first 30 days) after a youth is released from a juvenile justice facility. These practices include: (a) develop knowledge on the juvenile justice system from which the youth is transitioning; (b) meet with the transition team from the juvenile justice system, youth, and family; (c) expedite transfer of records, check credits earned, review the Individualized Education Program (IEP) and the Individualized Transition Plan; (d) provide evidence-based practices (academic, social, emotional, and vocational); (e) monitor youth progress; and (f) engage in reflective practice.

Even as research-based practices continue to be identified, the research to practice gap persists. School personnel indicated it is difficult to implement practices and support youth returning from the juvenile justice system in a manner that will make them successful (Sinclair et al., 2017). Abrams and Snyder (2010) also identified a need to have strong inter-agency collaboration focused on an ecological approach in which systems are working together and families are included as youth reengage with their community. Community-based treatment (alternatives to juvenile corrections with a focus on evidence-based treatments [i.e., cognitive behavioral therapy [CBT], multi-systemic therapy], restorative programs) has been portrayed as a better option when working with youth from the juvenile justice system (Chhabra, 2017). Community-based treatment may help youth with their own array of concerns that include staying out of trouble, completing their education, supporting themselves financially, finding or keeping a job, gang violence and involvement, and drugs or alcohol (Fields & Abrams, 2010).

One particular practice used to address multiple concerns is the inclusion and integration of transition specialists within reentry procedures. With interagency collaboration

being both a support and barrier to supporting youth reentry (Sinclair et al., 2017), finding key personnel that can bridge both systems (i.e., education and juvenile justice) is valuable. Cole and Cohen (2013) interviewed personnel within the juvenile justice system and found there were benefits to having a transition specialist work across systems. It was indicated that having school personnel bridge both systems prevented common barriers to youth engagement, including obtaining administrative and school personnel support prior to youth placement (Cole & Cohen, 2013). In addition, Griller Clark and Unruh (2010) found the utilization of transition specialists during youth reentry to school and community resulted in a smoother transition due to the transition specialist's relationship with the student and school.

Yet, even with the identification of effective treatment types and best practices, implementation of these interventions and practices is lacking. Systemic barriers, such as lack of services in schools and the community, are chronic (Cole & Cohen, 2013). Practices must be identified that are feasible to implement and have some level of acceptability by those implementing them. Mathur et al. (2019b) provided an outlet for youth with disabilities who were in the juvenile justice system to share their voice on what the reentry process was like for them. The authors iterated a need for more youth perspectives, suggesting that by taking into account their experience, implementation of practices is likely to produce more productive outcomes. Overall, there is a lack of voice from youth with disabilities who have been involved with the juvenile justice system. In addition, there is a dearth of literature that provide parallel perspectives of youth and those who support them during the reentry process (i.e., transition specialists). Due to the chronic persistence of recidivism and limited effective interventions to deter recidivism, there is a need for a more in-depth evaluation of youth and transition specialists perspectives on the reentry process regarding what facilitators and barriers are to successful reentry.

This study examined data from a model demonstration grant funded through the Office of Special Education Programs that utilized key personnel (i.e., transition specialist) already positioned in schools to help facilitate youth reentry. This study provided an opportunity to examine the cross-level interaction between youth and the systems around them (i.e., their relationships with transition specialists and their transition outcomes). Three demonstration sites—urban, suburban, and rural—were established in a Northwest state to embed cross-agency reentry services into the schools' normal operating procedures.

While results from research have indicated a positive impact that transition specialists have on youth during reentry, there is a dearth of research on the dynamic relationship between transition specialists and the youth they support. The purpose of this study was to understand the relationships between recently released individuals from the juvenile justice system and the transition specialists who help

facilitate their reentry into the community, as well as their perceptions of the reentry process. The model demonstration project focused on how to use transition specialists as a bridge between the juvenile justice and school systems, and why it can be helpful to use transition specialists to support a youth's reentry.

We asked transition specialists and recently reengaged youth a variety of questions on the youth's reentry process to investigate three research questions:

Research Question 1: How do transition specialists support a youth's reentry to school, work, and life?

Research Question 2: What are the barriers observed when working toward successful reentry?

Research Question 3: What are the strategies that are used to overcome barriers and support successful reentry?

Method

Participants

Transition specialists. Transition specialists at three sites in a northwest state were recruited for the model demonstration grant. In total, seven transition specialists were interviewed over a 3-year period. Of the seven interviewed, four transition specialists were interviewed multiple times while they continued with the model demonstration project. Four transition specialists identified as male, three identified as female. Five transition specialists were White, one Hispanic, and one Black. A total of 13 interviews were conducted.

Youth. A total of eight youth were interviewed. To be eligible for participation in the model demonstration project all youth had to have been adjudicated, had an active IEP, and currently unenrolled from school. Youth were adjudicated for a variety of offenses including property damage, drug offenses, or for personal conflict (e.g., gang violence). For participation in the interview each youth received a US\$25 gift card. All interviewed youth were male with a mean age of 22.3 years. The mean age of first adjudication of the sample was 14.9 years. Youth identified as Hispanic (44.4%), White (33.3%), and Black (22.2%).

Procedures

All procedures and research activities were approved by the internal review board. Informed consent was obtained from youth and transition specialists at the start of the model demonstration as well as at the beginning of each follow-up interview.

Model demonstration project. Initially, school districts were recruited for the model demonstration grant. Transition

specialists were then recruited within the recruited districts to participate in the study. For their participation in the model demonstration grant, transition specialists received initial training on the project (i.e., utilizing transition specialists as a conduit for helping youth with disabilities reengage with their community), and evidence-based practices (i.e., motivational interviewing [MI] and CBT) to implement during their interaction with youth. In addition, transition specialists received ongoing training to help facilitate a sustained implementation of evidence-based practices and help transition specialists troubleshoot any issues they encountered. In addition to training in evidence-based practices, such as MI and CBT, transition specialists received training in effective secondary transition practices that are associated with positive post-school outcomes (e.g., career awareness, work-based learning opportunities, social skill training, vocational coursework; Test et al., 2009). In-person trainings were held over 2 days and conducted by experts in the field with 10 years of applied and research experience and were customized for the juvenile justice population. Ongoing coaching was provided to transition specialists virtually in small groups by project staff.

After the transition specialists' training was completed, the transition specialists began working with their district to identify youth participants that would be reenrolling in school from a juvenile justice setting. When potential participants were identified, transition specialists reached out to the youth and their caregiver (i.e., parent, caregiver, or guardian) to provide information on the project. Once informed consent was acquired, youth became active in the project demonstration grant.

Interview procedures. The interviewer was personnel on the model demonstration project with a master's level education and had an extensive history with interviewing and qualitative methods. The interviewer used a semi-structured interview process to guide the transition specialists and youth through a series of questions regarding the youth's reentry process, partnership between the transition specialists and youth, and implementation of evidence-based practices. Interview with each transition specialist lasted between 45 min and 90 min depending on the interviewer's use of follow-up questions and transition specialists' response length. Transition specialists had the opportunity to be interviewed multiple times during the duration of the study, youth participants however, were only interviewed once at the completion of their participation.

Transition specialists were asked a range of questions depending on what time point they were interviewed. In initial interviews, transition specialists were asked: (a) about the training they received prior to working with systems involved youth; (b) how they supported a youth's engagement with school, work, and community (i.e., *how successful have you been in arranging individualized aftercare and*

community supports for the youth you work with); (c) what they perceived as barriers when working with each youth (i.e., *can you talk about the challenges you encounter when a young offender reenters the school setting?*); and (d) what strategies from their training they used when working with youth (i.e., *what strategies are you presently using to obtain information from the students you are working with to help them with their reentry*). Follow-up interviews asked similar questions with additional questions regarding: (a) the implementation of evidence-based practices, (b) their relationship with each youth participant, and (c) their perceptions on the reentry process. Youth were asked questions regarding: (a) how the transition specialist supported their transition to school, work, and community; (b) what experiences they perceived as difficult during their transition from facility to community; and (c) what they believe went well when working with their designated transition specialist.

Data Analysis

Interviews were audio-recorded and later transcribed. Each interview was de-identified prior to coding, except for an indicator that identified the interviewee as either a transition specialist (TS) or youth (Y). Two of the authors followed thematic coding procedures as described by Miles et al. (2013). Thematic coding was completed by a post-doctoral researcher who has a background in thematic coding and intimate knowledge of the project, but did not collect interview data, and a master's student who had experience working with individuals in juvenile correctional facilities, but also did not collect interview data. The two coders were provided de-identified interview data, which provided an opportunity for bias reduction and removal of personal connection to participants. The interviews were initially coded for primary-level themes that covered a broad array of topics. Primary-level themes were initially focused on deductive thematic issues of transition (i.e., employment, postsecondary education, independent living) and any specifics focused on reentry (i.e., barriers experienced or strategies that were helpful). Once primary-level coding was completed, the authors recoded the interviews for secondary-level themes that were salient in the interviewee responses. Tertiary-level coding was conducted to identify specific activities that supported the secondary-level codes. Secondary and tertiary coding were inductive in nature in which themes within primary codes emerged.

Two authors coded each interview blinded from each other. Once initial coding for primary-level themes was completed, each coded item was evaluated for agreement across the raters. If there was disagreement (i.e., a coded item that did not have a matched code by the two authors) across a coded item by the two authors, a consensus dialogue was initiated. To come to consensus the authors followed the following procedures: (a) the coded item was

reread, (b) each operational definition of the code in question was reread, (c) each author described why they believed their code was accurate, and (d) consensus was reached once the two authors agreed on the final code. This procedure was conducted for all three levels of thematic coding. Thematic codes identified through inductive analysis were defined through a similar consensus process as stated above. Codes were initially created by each blinded coder. Once coders came together codes were compared and an agreed-upon code was decided based on similarities of the themes identified through inductive analysis. This iterative process driven by consensus established more accurate coding per theme.

Of note, the interviews were conducted with study participants who agreed to be interviewed. The results, due to the limited number of transition specialist and youth interviews, could hold bias to the privilege of participating in an intervention, the specific influences of the region, how policy impacts student outcomes, and the individual's own history, whether novice or experienced, with the youth population. Furthermore, the positionality of the authors who analyzed the interview data also ranged in their involvement with the research project, which may provide some objectivity, due to their distance from the interviewees, but also could be a limitation due to lack of a relationship with the interviewees (Trainor, 2013). Semi-structured interviews were used to make meaning on how an innovative approach to support youth engagement flourished or faltered in youth reentry from the juvenile justice system.

Results

After the completion of thematic coding of transition specialists and youth interviews, utilizing both deductive and inductive analysis, five primary-level thematic codes emerged. Three codes focused on the areas of transition as defined by Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (2004) including (a) employment, (b) education/training, and (c) independent living. The fourth and fifth codes consisted of the relationship between the transition specialists and the youth when dealing with, (d) the barriers toward a successful reentry, and (e) the strategies used to overcome these barriers. Transition specialists' primary, secondary, and tertiary codes can be found in Figure S1, and youth' primary, secondary, and tertiary codes can be found in Figure S2 of the Supplemental Materials for this volume. These primary-level codes were expected due to their alignment to the research questions, and the semi-structured interview questions aligned with effective secondary transition practices for youth with disabilities. As we coded the interview data, it became evident that the relationship between the transition specialists and youth was a critical feature of the program activities. For both transition specialists and youth, barriers and strategies were often the

point of discussion and were discussed more than areas specific to supporting gainful employment, postsecondary education, and independent living.

As the authors came to consensus and discussed the coding schematics across transition specialists and youth interviews, secondary-level codes emerged. With the alignment of primary and secondary-level codes, the raters were able to identify common themes and examples that span across interviewees. The tertiary-level codes were specific practices found within the primary codes of *employment*, *education/training*, and *independent living* and will be discussed toward the end of the "Results" section as a way for youth and transition specialists voices to be shared about what they have done that connected youth with positive outcomes. Mathur et al. (2019b) suggested "capturing the voice of youth is more challenging than objectively examining the reentry process because youth perspectives are connected to their experience with the reentry process" (p. 3).

Employment

Employment was a primary-level code and coded when a youth or transition specialist discussed any action, activity, or strategy that helped the youth with obtaining some form of employment or sustaining employment. There were multiple approaches to finding employment options for the youth used by transition specialists. Specifically, transition specialists shared three main approaches for supporting a young offender to gain employment. These approaches were coded on a secondary level under job facilitation. The three approaches described were tertiary-level codes. The first was to take a "matching" approach focused on individualized employment for the youth. In an instance of matching, the transition specialist would work with the youth to identify a youth's interest, the training necessary, and an employment path after training is required. For example, one youth mentioned that after completing training at the local community college in the automotive department, they would try to find a job at a local tire shop or car dealer. A second approach that transition specialists used were having specific entry-level jobs on hand that a youth could apply, and hopefully become engaged in employment immediately. One youth said about the transition specialist he worked with "Well he pretty much helped me get my first job, like real job. Yeah at Wendy's right over there." Another student mentioned "Well she's helped me here at the school with like a landscaping job. It's like a crew where you go out and do different sorts of things." This method relied on the transition specialists' knowledge of the local community and employment opportunities that were more likely to have a positive interaction with a youth previously involved in the juvenile justice system. The third approach used by students and transition specialists was to find work opportunities through known familial or friend connections. Reliance on

familial contacts was seen as a primary employment path for youth across all three research sites. The use of familial contacts was seen as a powerful tool due to the natural accountability the personal relationship provided, and disclosure of a youth's crime was commonly unnecessary.

Finding jobs for youth to apply was only one part of helping youth reengage with employment, coded under a secondary level as youth development, transition specialists worked with youth on their own skill development (e.g., helping youth with how to disclose their past behaviors and working with them on applying for a job). One youth stated "Yeah, she's been telling me what to say in job appointments. Like if they interview me, like what to say. Because I never been in a job interview before. Most of the work was at nurseries with my dad." Another student reported that the transition specialist "helped me on like information on what I should be asking like basically the best way you could do it or like how to dress and stuff, all the essentials I guess." Transition specialists also used different agencies and services (coded at the secondary level as vocational services), such as vocational rehabilitation services to coordinate employment opportunities and additional vocational training for the youth. One transition specialist said "What we've moved towards with [student name] is pushing them to getting into Voc Rehab because like, Voc Rehab can help them in ways that we can't."

Education and Training

Education and training were a primary-level code and coded when a youth or transition specialist discussed any action, activity, or strategy that helped the youth with obtaining some form of postsecondary education or additional training. It emerged throughout the analysis of the interviews, that postsecondary education and training was less of a consideration for many youth than employment. If a youth had aspirations to attend a postsecondary institution it was typically toward a goal of additional training (e.g., mechanics training) rather than completing a 4-year degree. Transition specialists reported working with youth to understand their postsecondary education goals (coded at the secondary level as education planning). Many times this included making sure youth knew what high school graduation and college enrollment options and requirements were. One transition specialist commented,

He's always like I want to work with my hands, I want to do that kind of stuff, I want to go to [local community college] and so the [community college] had their hands-on career fair day where they put on an exhibit like all their hands-on things like the medical field, the computer technology stuff, aviation mechanics, welding, carpentry, just like all the, they do so much stuff up there you know so like what you have to do is register as a high school and then the kids you're going to take

and so I thought this would be a perfect opportunity to take this kid who has always talked about going to [community college] to become a diesel mechanic.

Another transition specialist mentioned they worked with youth to develop "a more realistic idea of whether or not they would be able to test into credit level classes" noting that "a lot of our kids say I want to go to college because it sounds like it's not work."

Youth mentioned that the transition specialists helped them with education planning by working with them to take on credit recovery opportunities, understanding what their diploma options were, and identifying post high school education goals. One youth said during the interview, "Yes ma'am, well I'm working getting my math, reading, and science done because those are the classes that I need to graduate from this school. When all that's finished then I am just going to go to college." Another youth mentioned his success in taking credit recovery courses while in detention,

So I got quite a bit of credits in detention, and at rehab, and the other program. So it all added up, and I was like "yes!." Because they told me like "do your work because this stuff counts on the outside."

While high school graduation or obtaining a General Education Diploma was a primary focus for some of the youth that were interviewed progress toward a college degree was less so. Yet, with exposure to college activities like the "hands on fair" one youth was able to see opportunities that were not known to him before.

Independent Living

Independent living was a primary-level code and coded when a youth or transition specialist discussed any action, activity, or strategy that helped the youth with obtaining some form of community supports, housing supports, individualized services not included in education or employment. Transition specialists worked to support youth in reaching their independent living goals. Parenting was coded on a secondary level as one issue transition specialists helped multiple students with as they ventured into becoming new parents. Transition specialists were focused on making sure the youth had the skills and resources they needed to provide for their children, as well as connecting the youth with agencies or parenting classes within their communities. A transition specialist said

Because my kids are old, I do look beyond high school, but I have kids who have babies, I have kids who are pregnant, I have kids who are young dads. I really focus on their needs as far as parenting skills.

Some of the youth reported having a child as motivation to become better individuals after getting out of detention,

I had my mind right in some areas before I had him but then after I had him I knew that there's no way I can do anything to be sent back to prison because he makes me so happy. I don't have him growing up seeing me behind bars.

The transition specialists and youth both discussed the home environment (coded as a secondary-level code) during the interviews. Some of the youth indicated the need for stable and secure housing, "I live over on [street name] which is right over there with one of my friends, and his dad is going to let me stay there until I save up enough to move out." Other youth mentioned wrestling with their own familial responsibilities and the desire for self-independence. Consistent with what the youth reported, transition specialists also noted that students were having difficulty with housing and their home environment that may deter them from their own goals. One transition specialist mentioned,

I think overall you see a lot of kids that are like, I don't want to go home. There nothing for me to do there, you know. So it's like, the home environment isn't great, they want to be in school so it's, you know, 'I'm going to follow the rules so I don't get sent home.'

Barriers to Supporting Youth Reentry

Barriers to the reentry process were discussed frequently throughout interviews with transition specialists and youth. Barriers to supporting youth reentry was a primary-level code and was coded when a transition specialist or youth indicated a challenge or negative experience that prohibited them from achieving a reentry goal or success in their environment (i.e., work, school, community). Transition specialists identified similar barriers that impacted a youth's successful reentry (described below) and contributed additional barriers. The most pervasive barriers were the issues the youth faced personally including substance use, poverty, and gang relations (coded on a secondary level as issues youth face personally). A transition specialist discussed issues of poverty for one of the youth she worked with:

You know, poverty is a problem and with that comes just a real transient nature of these kids. They moved, their parents get kicked out of their houses. They move from one place to another. Suddenly every kid from [one town] winds up in [the neighboring town], so that is a challenge for those kids because they are all over the place.

Additional issues youth faced personally included transportation problems, truancy, and academic issues. A transition specialist working with a youth mentioned working on homework with them—"but a majority of what really helps

them is with their homework. A lot of kids I have struggle with school—just not wanting to be there, not really understanding the coursework." Other personal issues that transition specialist pointed out were lack of social skills and the need for consistent employment. Lack of services (secondary-level code) was an additional barrier. Specifically, there was a lack of developmentally appropriate services and a lack of transition from youth to adult services. One transition specialist mentioned the need for age-appropriate substance use program, for example, alcoholics anonymous. Another transition specialist talked about youth aging out and being dropped by supports, "You know, once they're done with us, you know, they don't know who else to call. They need an advocate and there's just, they're just not there."

Transition specialists also reported barriers that included the youth's negative interactions with adults and the educational system they were being placed (coded on a secondary level as youth's interaction with education system). Transition specialists mentioned that the youth had distrust for adults due to previous experiences, and they had to work within a system where they experienced racism and bias. One transition specialist recalled one experience she had with a guidance counselor:

And I know when I took a young lady this year into school the guidance counselor at this particular school—this young lady should have been a junior, but she only had three credits so the first question out of the guidance counselor's mouth was, 'so why are you coming here because you're obviously not going to graduate?'

Transition specialists also highlighted systemic issues the youth experienced. Many systemic issues were out of the control of the youth. For example, lack of information sharing across juvenile justice and education systems made it difficult for easy transition from one system to another. Transition specialists also recognized that long waits or inaccurate records can lead to delayed services and student engagement.

Youth commented mainly on two types of barriers, the negative influences in the community after reentry (coded on a secondary level as negative influences), and their academics (coded on the secondary level as academics). Youth mentioned they had difficulty staying out of trouble due to the negative influences in the community and from their peers:

Yeah I know almost everybody [in the city] from every school so everywhere I go I'm going to see somebody so it really just comes down to my choice making—what I'm going to do and who I'm going to hang out with.

Youth reported that this was often due to their peer's connection with illegal substance use and gang participation. One youth stated bluntly about involvement with gangs "It's very hard to get out." The youth shared that they

needed to remove themselves from the negative influences of peers who often were individuals that lead to the youth's adjudication; "Dropping my old friends. I think that had to be the toughest thing because they're close to me. It's hard but I managed to do it so I think my life is getting better."

Furthermore, youth mentioned that their academics and interactions with schools were also a barrier. Specifically, youth indicated that after reentry they identified that their educational placement was not a good match—"I went to [name of high school]. But it wasn't really working out with my attendance so I came here." For some youth, they reported that their interactions with school staff were also a barrier to them successfully reengaging in the school. One youth stated,

There's a couple of staff that I don't like, and I know they don't like me. Then they purposely try to give me a hard time. Like I am pretty sure they do, and it works sometimes you know. Because at the end of the day they win. They go home. They have the power.

While the most salient barriers youth endorsed including the environment they returned to and access to an appropriate education setting, they also identified the need for basic necessities (coded on a secondary level as basic needs) that impact their day-to-day life as a barrier. For instance, a couple youth mentioned the need for consistent and stable housing and transportation. Often, these youth would ask friends to stay on couches without knowing how long they could stay. Due to issues regarding constant mobility, some youth mentioned not having the appropriate documentation they needed to get services (e.g., identification, transcripts). Youth sometimes relied on the transition specialists to help overcome these barriers.

Positive Reentry Experiences

Positive reentry experiences were coded across transition specialists and youth interviews as any experience that a transition specialist or youth identified that supported constructive engagement in employment, education, and independent living. Transition specialists reported using a variety of strategies to support a successful reentry for the youth.

Strategy 1. In alignment with the youth's perceptions (described below), rapport building and being a positive adult model for the youth was the primary strategy that the transition specialists used to support the youth. Transition specialists took the opportunity to advocate for youth when there was no caregiver or guardian available and would work with the youth using MI skills they learned in their training to help students follow through with their goals and change behavior. A transition specialist said "Oh yeah, the moment, even when we just sat down to talk about the

program and like, what were talking about, I was using MI [motivational interviewing] just to kind of get them in that mind-set."

Strategy 2. Transition specialists ensured supports were in place to help youth in their educational placement. Specifically, they mentioned giving students academic assessments and other assessments focused and post-school life to help with transition planning. This entailed working with the youth to plan their education, working with school personnel prior to youth reentry with the school so that they know how to work with the youth, and advocating for flexibility for the youth as they transition into a different education system or school.

Strategy 3. Transition specialists also worked with families when possible to coordinate youth support and help youth stay engaged at school or work. As the youth interviews were analyzed, qualitative evidence suggested that the relationships the youth formed with the transition specialists were important to them and their successful reentry to the community. Overwhelmingly, youth indicated how important the positive rapport with each transition specialist was to their successful reentry. One youth said "probably like our relationship because like we could always joke around and like I don't know me and him just get along so well. It's everything, I think everything me and him did together was good." Another youth commented on the transition specialist they worked with:

My best thing is that she's very understanding. If there's something you can't complete she doesn't push negativity on you. She's very optimistic . . . She is just one of the best helpers that I've come in contact with that has helped somebody graduate. I've never met someone that's wanted the students to graduate so bad before. They don't do this for a paycheck. They really care.

In addition, the youth reported that the transition specialist helped them stay engaged in school, by checking in and keeping them on track to accomplish their goals, and providing transportation if necessary (e.g., to get to a job interview). One youth mentioned,

Basically she helped me with the same thing, like getting to graduation, staying on track and I want to go to college, so I talk [to her] about that. The plan is just not to get into trouble and if I need help I can talk to [her] and she can help me out.

The positive relationship the youth and transition specialist had allowed for students to talk about how the youth could succeed in their educational placement, while still being able to come to them for academic help. The youth also mentioned how their relationship provided an opportunity to gain in their own job skill development. Students mentioned

working with their transition specialist sitting with them, finding job, filling out applications, practicing interviews, and having flexibility if they had a job interview.

Innovative Practices

The specific strategies that transition specialists used that had a positive impact on youth were coded as innovative practices. The innovative practice code was a secondary-level code under the primary-level codes of employment, education, and independent living. These are practices that the transition specialists used to support youth engagement and are not commonly found in the research literature or identified as an evidence-based or research-based practice. Innovative practices were identified to share what actions individuals are taking to support a youth's reentry with their community.

Employment. One transition specialist, who had a long history of working with youth returning from the juvenile justice system, created a community map (see Crane et al., 2018). This community map provided information on companies that were willing to hire youth that previously were involved with the juvenile justice system. Specifically, the transition specialist mentioned youth finding jobs in warehouses, hotels, and fast food restaurants. Due to prior work on the community map, the transition specialist would sit down with a youth and go over the list of companies the youth could potentially apply. This was one way to prevent issues, such as being denied a job due to past experiences.

Another discussed practice was youth training and acquisition of work certificates. One strategy a transition specialist used to get youth employment help was to help the youth enroll in various certificate trainings in areas the youth may be interested. These included first aid and cardiopulmonary resuscitation (CPR), Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA), food handlers' card, forklift training, and/or road construction flaggers certificate. In addition, when the transition specialist worked with the youth they discussed any entry-level certification or apprenticeships to carpentry, plumbing, or electrical. The purpose behind obtaining certificates while in school, was to help youth advance their skills to obtain better quality jobs as well as have all the necessary qualifications for a job which may lead to employment.

Youth also identified practices they deemed helpful. One program was designed to help youth accomplish two goals (a) pay off any fines they accumulated due to their prior history as a youth offender, and (b) receive training and practice in a variety of jobs. This program uses a tiered structure of responsibilities (meaning youth are given more responsibility as they work through the program). Youth would first receive training in a coffee shop, but ultimately, end their time receiving training in welding or mechanics.

Education. Transition specialists focused on career exploration through college programming. Transition specialists used partnerships with the local community colleges to: (a) find ways for students to obtain college credits and high school credits at the same time; and (b) participate in unique college programmatic activities, such as open houses and career fairs. The local community college provided an opportunity for the transition specialists to take youth to campus and let them see what it means to be in the car or diesel mechanic, welder, and car painter programs. The youth shared that these experiences were useful for their reentry process. One particular community college had a "Hands On" career fair, where individuals in the community could see what programs they offer that are more hands on. This gave youth a chance to see different professions that may be more aligned to their career aspirations. Career awareness has been identified as a predictor of post-school success (see transitionta.org; Test et al., 2009) and exposing students to different college programs that lead directly to different careers is one opportunity to expand youth awareness to the different opportunities available to them.

Independent living. The transition specialists worked with youth on a variety of basic living skills that could intersect with developing positive outcomes in work and school. One transition specialist started working with a youth on creating a basic hygiene schedule and connecting the youth with services in town that could provide clean clothes. The transition specialist believed it was important that the youth was able to have a place to shower and get clothes, so that would not be an issue when looking for jobs or attending school. Another transition specialist connected youth with a program called clean slate. This program focused on helping youth have a clean driving record. The program had a fee; however, it could support a youth to clean up past history with driving violations.

Finally, because housing can be difficult to find for individuals with a record, a local organization began helping youth become responsible tenants. A transition specialist at one of the alternative schools provided the certification process on location. Youth could participate in classes that discuss tenant rights, landlord rights, how to advocate for yourself, and how to discuss legal past and credit histories. This certificate could be presented to rental agencies and landlords for some assurance that no matter the past history the youth knows what it means to be a good tenant.

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to evaluate how the use of transition specialists in school districts could help facilitate the reentry of youth from the juvenile justice system into their school and community. Reflecting on the Lipsey (2009) meta-analysis, and aligning the importance of the

type of treatment, dosage and quality of the treatment, and the individuals receiving the treatment, to the model demonstration grant, there are encouraging associations.

In regards to type of treatment, the model demonstration grant utilized transition specialists to work with youth returning to the community from a juvenile justice setting. Through the utilization of a school personnel already functioning within the school setting, implementation issues involving readiness and capacity were reduced (Blasé et al., 2013). For example, schools did not need to hire any new personnel, and the personnel working with the youth were already working and connected to the community they were servicing. With regards to dosage and the quality of treatment, the model demonstration grant provided an opportunity for youth to interact one-on-one with a point person to engage in short- and long-term planning. This provided a unique experience that many youth at risk for negative outcomes never receive. The transition specialists were provided tools and training in evidence-based practices to implement high-quality intervention, which is also a unique experience for many para-professionals who do not receive much training (Carter et al., 2009).

The youth and transition specialists also discussed the unique relationship they had with each other and the positive outcomes that came from that relationship. Transition specialists are continually identified as key personnel that can make a difference in the lives of young offenders who have been recently released from a juvenile justice setting. Recently, Mathur et al. (2019a) found students who participated in a reentry program with support from transition specialists produced better outcomes (i.e., engagement in the community and lower recidivism rates) than students who did not receive transition specialists' supports. In the current study, the transition specialists were ready to implement practices immediately and were ready to engage with youth when it was needed. In addition, transition specialist had opportunities for youth to participate in school or work immediately after release, providing a seamless transition of services and practices that is critical to reduce recidivism (Bullis et al., 2002). There is mounting qualitative evidence that suggest transition specialists could be a critical support for students during their reentry process. Finally, this study matched school personnel with students at risk for negative outcomes and potential recidivism. Many of the youth involved with this project were determined to do well and make peace with their past, yet acknowledging the difficulties they may experience in their future.

Our summative findings from interviews from transition specialists and youth suggest that the youth who were in the process of reentry with their school and community benefited from their connection with the transition specialists. It was clear that the youth believed they benefited from having a knowledgeable point person to help them with all three transition-related outcomes: education/training, employment, and

independent. Another implication of this finding is the need for personnel within a school who are knowledgeable of transition practices. There are many components to transition planning and delivery, that without the institutional knowledge of transition practices, a smooth reentry process may be threatened. That said, based on our analysis a critical finding of this study was the relationship between a youth and their transition specialist was most important for positive youth outcomes. In addition, the transition specialists were who the youth found dependable and helped facilitate their reentry with the community. The youth relied on the transition specialists to help with a variety of concerns relative to school, work, and their home life. They found they could talk with transition specialists without judgment.

Limitations

Qualitative methods are integral to the advancement of knowledge regarding the specific experiences of individuals. Yet, due to the small sample size and the geographically bound placement of the model demonstration grant, there may be threats to external validity and generalizability of the experiences and relationships portrayed in these interviews. The age of our participants may also have biased our results. Age of participants may dictate what was the most pressing concerns for the youth (e.g., graduating high school versus getting a job). In addition, the authors think it is important for transparency, and want to acknowledge that there are alternative limitations to using interviews for qualitative methods, but suggest that interviews can also bolster and validate data (Trainor, 2013).

Implications for Research and Practice

Finding effective and efficient ways to work with populations who are vulnerable to negative outcomes is important to many in both the juvenile justice and education systems. Knowing that youth behavior does not function within a vacuum, consideration to the ecological systems that impact each youth is critical. Attention must be paid, not only to how the youth functions within systems, but how interventions function in the system, and its impact on the youth. Furthermore, we must understand the weight of how the positive relationship between transition specialists and youth are also impacted by the function of multiple systems working together. As implications are discussed below, we must consider what ways transition specialists may support or enhance practices that have promising effects on a youth's reentry.

System-level practices. Youth returning from the juvenile justice system must find ways to navigate multiple systems including, but not limited to, the school, workplace, juvenile justice services, mental health, community, and home. Improving coordination across systems is essential for

improving outcomes of juvenile offenders (Mallett, 2014). While improving communication across systems is a substantial barrier to overcome, partnerships may begin locally where common interests of communities may make for quicker change (Mallett, 2014). From this study and previously conducted research (e.g., Griller Clark & Unruh, 2010), it was found that transition specialists were able to be a liaison between systems for the youth. For youth with disabilities, wrap-around services have been found to be one strategy that has seen positive outcomes during reentry (Miller & Therrien, 2018; Sinclair et al., 2017). Miller and Therrien (2018) provided a multiphase checklist that provides a step-by-step approach to working with youth involved in the juvenile justice system from initial intake, through residency, and immediately prior and post release.

In addition to navigating systems, youth from the juvenile justice system must also face returning to environments and peers that may have facilitated their problem behaviors or increase their likelihood of recidivism. Alternatively, some youth's reentry into their community will experience homelessness, as some of the participants in this study experienced. For youth who are at risk of negative experiences such as homelessness, intensive supports are needed. Lutze et al. (2014) found that wrap-around services and an individualized housing plan helped reduced overall risks of recidivism in high-risk offenders. Yet, without help and extensive knowledge to services it maybe difficult for youth to find the connections that would ultimately make intensive services successful. This may provide an opportunity for transition specialists to be an even stronger positive force on the youth they work with.

System-level research. The mounting qualitative evidence on the positive impact that transition specialists have on a youth's reentry to the community from the juvenile justice is promising. Additional research that focuses on rigorous quantitative designs (e.g., randomized control trials) and evaluates outcomes of transition specialists support could be a positive addition to the evidence base. Furthermore, not all states have transition specialists or the opportunity to use transition specialists in this manner. Evaluation across states to determine potential point personnel that could be assigned to support a youth's reentry would also be beneficial. Our interpretation of findings suggests that the use of school personnel already hired within the school system supporting the youth in the study may help sustainability efforts of this practice. Another implication for future research would be to conduct a replication study of Bullis et al. (2002) to determine if the use of transition specialists as a liaison to reentry, like the current study, mediates outcomes for youth or reduces recidivism rates.

Individual-level practices. The ecological model identified individual characteristics and self-regulation in the center

of the model. In this study, transition specialists worked with youth to develop specific transition-related skills. These transition-related skills, including self-regulation and critical thinking, were said to be beneficial for the youth. Other programs such as the READY for WAGES program (Johnson et al., 2004) are focused on youth employment readiness skill development. Pham et al. (2017) discuss one important aspect of youth skill development, which is learning when and how a youth should disclose to potential employers about their involvement with the juvenile justice system. In the disclosure lesson (see Pham et al., 2017), youth learn communication skills, how to address employers, how to explain positives and negatives of their pasts, and how they overcome bad decisions.

Another area of need for future prevention is supporting a youth's interaction with their peers. In a study by Unruh and Bullis (2005) adjudicated youth identified negative peer association as their number one barrier to successful transition. Relationships with peers can have both positive and negative impacts on a youth's reentry. For example, certain peer relationships may be tenuous and can often lead to continued criminality, or other peers may support a youth's housing needs (e.g., couch surfing) if a youth has unstable housing after they are released. Future research should focus on social skills specific to peer relationships and the experiences youth might face when they reenter into the community.

It is also suggested that families (e.g., biological parents, legal guardians, or caretakers) be involved throughout the transition planning process for youth reentry, as youth are most likely to return to their family of origin. Careful consideration of their home context during the transition planning process may help with reducing the risk for recidivism (Garfinkel, 2010) because the family dynamics may have changed while the youth was incarcerated (e.g., different home with no bedroom, additional siblings, new parental figure if youth's parent has a new partner). Dishion and Patterson (2006) also discuss how antisocial behaviors are not only learned from peers but from familial interactions as well. Supporting families during a youth's reentry may be another strategy to support youth and reduce recidivism.

Individual-level research. From the analysis of multiple interviews it was found that relationships do matter and the youth who interacted with transition specialists believed those relationships were important to their reentry experience. Future research on the specifics of what those relationships mean to youth and what they get out of the relationship could help build more effective training for individuals working with youth returning from the juvenile justice system. Additional research that builds upon the literature focusing on risk factors to recidivism and protective factors to successful reentry within the school setting could also benefit an already vulnerable population. Research on

risk and protective factors could lead a preventive approach that schools and school personnel could implement.

Conclusion

Relationships matter to systems involved youth. Over the course of the interviews, it was clear that youth believed so many positive achievements came from the strong bond between transition specialists and themselves. While, persistent systemic and individual barriers impede on a youth's successful reentry with the school and community, anecdotal evidence from these interviews and previous research continue to demonstrate that transition specialists are viable and beneficial supports for youth to stay engaged in school and community.

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