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What Youth With Special Needs in Juvenile Justice Say About Reentry: Listening to Their Voice

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to listen to what youth with special needs in juvenile justice (JJ) settings say they need to be successful during reentry. The three instruments used to gain an understanding of their perspectives on reentry and their perceptions of barriers include (a) intake interviews, (b) focus groups, and (c) semi-structured post-release interviews. Major themes shared are related to reentry programming, post-release transition activities, barriers to success, influences, and outcomes. This article also notes the differences between productively engaged and not productively engaged youth. Finally, the article discusses implications of these findings on transition programming and reentry practices for youth and JJ settings.

Keywords

qualitative methods, focus groups, delinquency, resilience

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Youth in juvenile justice (JJ) settings often struggle to effectively transition back into the community due in part to a lack of effective reentry services (The Council of State Governments Justice Center, 2015; Farn & Adams, 2016). JJ settings include both long-term correctional facilities and short-term detention facilities. Youth released from these settings need reentry services and support to reintegrate or "engage" in the community. Person-centered approaches to engagement are more critical for JJ youth with disabilities (Griller Clark & Unruh, 2010; Mathur & Griller Clark, 2013). These youth are significantly overrepresented in the JJ system and are less likely to be engaged with the community after release compared with their peers without special needs (Griller Clark, Mathur, & Helding, 2011). At least 30% to 60% of incarcerated youth require special education services, compared with a prevalence rate of 10% to 12% in public schools (Improving Transition Outcomes for Youth Involved in Juvenile Justice System, 2010). Many of them had their first contact with the JJ system at an earlier age and engaged in much riskier behaviors at their second or third offenses than those without disabilities (Zhang, Barrett, Katsiyannis, & Yoon, 2011). The average time for a youth with special needs to be rearrested is approximately 3 years, compared with 7 years for typical youth (Zhang et al., 2011). Therefore, reentry strategies must be individualized for youth with special needs.

Although the term "engagement" is commonly used in school-based research related to academic achievement (Stefansson, Gestsdottir, Geldhof, Skulason, & Lerner, 2016), it is also used as a measure of youth reentry success (Bullis, Yovanoff, & Havel, 2004; Griller Clark et al., 2011; Zaff, Ginsberg, Boyd, & Kakli, 2014). When "engagement" is used with JJ-involved youth, it generally refers to positive outcomes, such as employment or school enrollment upon release from a JJ facility (Bullis et al., 2004). Engagement is considered a multidimensional construct consisting of observable measures related to academic or job performance, prosocial or desirable behavior, emotion, and cognitive processes (Sinclair, Christenson, Lehr, & Anderson, 2003). It is malleable, responsive to contextual features, and amenable to environmental change (Fredricks, Blumenfeld, & Paris, 2004). When reentry programming takes into consideration the personal (i.e., emotional, cognitive, and behavioral) and situational (i.e., family, job, and school) needs of JJ-involved youth, more productive outcomes can be expected. Thus, engagement can be considered a good measure of reentry success.

Zaff et al. (2014) examined the process of developing productive engagement, defined as "a global construct of the motivation to engage in a variety of actions that have a positive valence and the behavioral expression of that motivation" (p. 82), for 38 disengaged youth who were gang-affiliated, JJ-involved, and/or homeless. The goal of the study by Zaff et al. was to

understand patterns of productive engagement and their relationship with prior risk levels and academic progress. The researchers found that productive engagement for disconnected youth did not develop along a homogeneous path; rather, all youth experienced variations in engagement and fell into two positive and two negative trajectory groups. The researchers did not find any apparent systematic relationship between demographic or risk variables, concluding that person-centered approaches and not group membership provide a better understanding of the process of engagement for disengaged youth. The study highlighted that disengaged youth have the capacity to engage in productive aspects of life, but some youth take longer to engage than others.

JJ settings have the responsibility to not only deliver court-ordered services and consequences for delinquent behavior but to also help youth develop a repertoire of skills that will assist them become successfully engaged in their communities. High recidivism rates and poor educational and employment outcomes for youth discharged from JJ settings have raised questions about the relevance and value of the programs they receive while incarcerated (Lipsey, 2009; Steinberg, Chung, & Little, 2004; Wilson, Lipsey, & Soydan, 2003).

Youth Voice

Listening to the voices of youth with special needs can provide meaningful and useful perspectives that may differ from the normal discourse of researchers (Grover, 2004; McTier, 2015). Very little research exists that seeks to understand JJ-involved youth's experiences (Abrams & Aguilar, 2005; Dawes, 2011). Halsey (2006) stated, "Juvenile offenders have been rendered by experts (read adults) as immature, unreliable and incapable of truth telling . . . [and have, as a result] been cast permanently under a web of suspicion" (p. 148). Tilton (2013) explored how competing images of youth (e.g., dangerous thugs, vulnerable children, and kids who have made bad choices) coexist uneasily within the JJ system and significantly shape and constrain the services that are provided. To improve outcomes for JJ youth with special needs, it is necessary to explore the barriers they perceive in the reentry process and the support or resources that can be offered to improve successful engagement and outcomes.

Capturing the voice of youth is more challenging than objectively examining the reentry process because youth perceptions and perspectives are connected to their experience with the reentry process. Previous research on transition and reentry has primarily been process-based, confirmatory, and deductive (Bullis et al., 2004; Mathur & Griller Clark, 2014), where

researchers looked at traditional outcome measures of reentry, such as school attendance, employment, and recidivism (Griller Clark et al., 2011; Mathur & Griller Clark, 2013). However, this study is different because it capitalizes on capturing the voice of JJ youth with special needs in an explanatory, inductive approach by asking transition-related questions in a JJ setting at three separate time periods: (a) during an intake transition interview within the facility, (b) during a focus group in an inclusive transition class in the facility, and (c) during a one-on-one interview in the community at least 1 year after release from the facility. Thus, the purpose of this study was to listen to the voices of youth with special needs from a long-term JJ setting related to reentry by (a) obtaining youth perceptions of barriers, (b) analyzing youth dialogue related to transition programming, and (c) exploring post-release engagement and outcomes. Differences in perceptions of reentry between JJ youth with special needs who were productively engaged and those who were not productively engaged were explored.

Method

This study used a qualitative approach to examine perceptions of youth with special needs on barriers, transition programming, and reentry engagement and outcomes. The use of qualitative methods is an effective way to study the process and causation of an event, provides deeper and richer data analysis, and yields greater opportunities for confirmation and corroboration through triangulation (Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2014).

Setting

The study took place at a JJ facility located in the southwest United States. On average, the facility houses 180 youth. Of the 180 youth, approximately 35% are identified with special needs. The facility has a fully accredited school that operates a minimum of 180 days per year and has 7 hours of instruction each school day. Classroom instruction utilizes traditional, online, and technology-enhanced learning environment. Intake interviews and focus groups were conducted within the facility, while the post-release interviews were conducted at various locations in the community, such as a park or coffee shop. All youth who participated in the study were adjudicated delinquent and moderate to high risk, as measured by a risk recidivism instrument. The average length of stay in the facility at the time was 7 months. When youth were released, they were placed on parole. The average length of time on parole during the study was 7.4 months. The agency defines recidivism as a return to custody resulting from a parole violation or a new charge following

the release from a first-time commitment. The agency data at the time reported an average recidivism rate of 35.9%.

Participants

All of the youth who participated in the intake interviews were participants in Project Reentry Intervention and Support for Engagement (RISE). Services provided by Project RISE included the assignment of a transition specialist, consistent review of Individualized Educational Plans and Individualized Transition Plans (ITP), regular contact by the transition specialist with youth pre- and post-release, and individualized transition support for enrollment in school, employment, or other related reentry activities (see Mathur & Griller Clark, 2014, for additional details).

Youth were eligible for Project RISE if they (a) had special needs, that is, they were identified with learning disabilities (LD) or emotional disabilities (ED) that required individualized educational programming; (b) would be released to the county in which the project operates; and (c) had parent/guardian consent and youth assent. A total of 38 youth consisting of 35 males and three females participated in the intake interviews. Sixteen were identified as having LD and 22 as having ED. The mean age of the youth involved in Project RISE was 16. Of the 38 youth, 13 were Caucasian, 11 were Hispanic, and 14 were African American. The average stay in the facility was 323 days.

Participants in the focus groups consisted of two separate groups of youth enrolled in a transition course offered in an inclusive classroom inside the JJ facility. The first focus group/class comprised nine youth. Three of the nine youth were identified with special needs. The second focus group/class consisted of 12 youth enrolled in a different section of the same course. Five of these 12 youth were identified with special needs. Although the transition course was delivered in an inclusive setting to both youth with and without special needs, the primary focus was on listening to the views of youth with special needs.

Six of the 38 Project RISE youth participated in the post-release interviews. Three of these youth were productively engaged, and three youth were not productively engaged, based on the definition of "productive engagement" by Zaff et al. (2014). According to Zaff et al. (2014), the definition of "productively engaged" refers to youth who are motivated to participate and succeed in activities that are viewed as intrinsically "good" and beneficial for them (e.g., education, employment). The mean number of hours of reentry services and support the RISE transition specialist provided was essentially the same for both groups (M = 38 hours for productively engaged youth; M = 38.6 hours for not productively engaged youth).

These six youth had been in the community for over 60 days and were at least 18 years old. All six youth received special education services and transition services to develop a transition/reentry plan within the facility. After release, the six youth received individualized support services from the Project RISE transition specialist for a variety of reentry-related issues, such as obtaining records, navigating family and personal relationships, seeking and obtaining employment, problem-solving transportation, and academic and employment counseling. Demographic information for the six youth is presented in Table 1.

Procedures

Intake interviews. Within the first 30 days of being in the facility, 38 youth having special needs participated in intake interviews conducted by the Project RISE transition specialist, who was also a researcher of this study. The interview included questions related to academic strengths and weaknesses, current academic performance, accommodations, family history, employment history, social expectations, behavior, and treatment/JJ goals. Youth were also provided with a list of barriers and were asked to identify the top three barriers that may affect their reentry.

Focus groups. During each academic period, a transition course is offered to youth preparing for release. This course used the Merging Two Worlds transition Curriculum (Merging Two Worlds, 2018) and focused on career awareness, job preparation, and reentry planning. At the time of this study, two separate sections of this transition class were offered. Focus groups were conducted with all youth, those with and without special needs, in these classes. The second author facilitated these focus groups and a doctoral student recorded the responses manually, as recording devices are not allowed within the facility. Focus groups were used to obtain youth perspectives on transition/reentry programming within the facility, the transition course, and barriers to reentry. They also helped determine what differences may exist between the two populations—those currently in the facility and those who had been released (Patton, 2002). The questions for the focus groups can be found in Table 2.

Post-release interviews. The purpose of these interviews was to gain an understanding, through the participants' voices, of the specific personal, social, cultural, and historical factors that lead to their perspectives on reentry. The research team developed the interview questions after reviewing the literature and conducting beta testing to determine whether the interview questions

Table 1. Demographics for Post-Release Interview Participants.

Productive engagement	Race	Gender	Disability	Number of days in community	Total hours of individualized transition services	Current status
NPE	Hispanic	Male	ED	427	52	Recidivated; did not graduate from HS; unemployed
NPE	Hispanic	Male	ED	193	38	Recidivated; did not graduate from HS; gang leader; illegal activity; unemployed
NPE	White	Female	LD	184	26	Earned HS diploma in JJ facility; pregnant; unemployed
PE	Hispanic	Male	ED	109	18	Earned GED in JJ facility; employed
PE	Hispanic	Male	LD	194	60	Earned HS diploma; employed for 1+ years
PE	African American	Female	ED	139	36	Earned HS diploma; employed 1+ years

Note. NPE = not productively engaged; ED = emotional disabilities; HS = high school; LD = learning disabilities; JJ = juvenile justice; GED= General Educational Development; PE = productively engaged.

Table 2. Focus Group Discussion Questions.

1. What do you like about this curriculum? What works well? Which activities did you find most valuable?
2. What would you change about this curriculum? What doesn't work well? Which activities are least valuable?
3. Do you have any suggestions that would improve this class?
4. What do you think your biggest challenges will be when you get out? What are you most worried about?
5. How do you think you will deal with them? What strategies will you use?
6. Was there anything you learned in this class specifically that will help you?
7. What do you think we could do for you in here to help you go back to school? Gain employment?
8. What do you think would help you at the time you are released?
9. What do you think would help you more after you have been out for a bit?
10. What do you do when you run into barriers that are in the way of your plan?
11. What kinds of things help you overcome the barriers you run into?
12. What determines whether or not you get beyond the barrier or whether it stops you?
13. What are you hopeful about after your release?
14. How will you know whether you are successful in your transition? How will you know whether you are not successful?

provided meaningful information. As a result of feedback from the beta test, the researchers made several changes and created more open-ended questions.

The open-ended format encouraged participants to express their thoughts, perspectives, and opinions and to expand upon any questions that were asked throughout the interview. Follow-up questions were asked if participants were not responsive to the primary question and to tailor the interview to each participant. The researcher digitally recorded and transcribed the interviews. The questions for the post-release interview are listed in Table 3.

Analysis

Two researchers analyzed intake interviews using frequency data of the youth ranking of identified barriers. These researchers also analyzed the transcripts from the focus groups and the post-release interviews using a constant comparative approach (Patton, 2002). Researchers identified a preliminary list of codes (e.g., positive personal attitude, drugs, job) during the initial reading of the transcripts. In addition, they identified working definitions and compared them with the data to ensure that the codes reflected the language of the transcripts. Once they developed an initial codebook, they reviewed the codebook to verify findings. After reaching consensus on the codebook, the researchers

Table 3. Post-Release Interview Questions.

1. When you first met the TS, how did you feel about having assistance with your transition?
   a. What did you find hopeful, if anything, about the program description?
   b. Were your questions answered to your satisfaction?
   c. What communications did you share with others (family, probation, YPO, peers, etc.) about the opportunity to participate in Project RISE?
2. What questions or discussion items did you feel were beneficial to discuss at our meetings?
   a. What were some of those questions or discussion items, if any?
   b. Can you explain anything that stuck with you from those conversations?
   c. Were the meetings timed too often, not often enough, or just right?
3. During the transition planning phase, describe your commitment to following through with your plans upon release.
   a. What did you do to make your plans come true?
   b. If your transition plans changed prior to discharge, describe how and why the change was made.
4. How do you think the treatment programming inside the facility helped you (if any)?
   a. Were there ways the TS supported you in achieving treatment goals?
      i. If yes, please describe the experience
      ii. If no, please discuss how that could have been accomplished
5. Which activities did you find most valuable to your transition?
   a. Explain how these activities, if any, were valuable.
6. Were you engaged in all recommended follow-up services?
   a. What were the follow-up services? Are there other services you wish you had in place?
7. Explain how your educational goals affected your long-term plans?
   a. Speaking of education, did your plans on the inside change once released? If so, how and why?
8. Were you committed to the facility more than once?
   a. If yes, explain what activities led to recommitment
   b. If no, explain what activities helped you to not reoffend
9. What activities/goals do you feel the TS helped you with that you may not have been able to achieve independently?
10. Describe the role of your family and how they affected your transition?
11. What is your definition of "successful transition?"
12. What recommendations do you have regarding how we could better support you in reentering SCHOOL (school, work, family, etc.)?
13. What recommendations do you have regarding how we could better support you in reentering EMPLOYMENT (school, work, family, etc.)?
14. What recommendations do you have regarding how we could better support you in reentering FAMILY (school, work, family, etc.)?
15. How hopeful are you about your future?

Note. YPO = youth probation officer; TS = transition specialist; RISE = Reentry Intervention and Support for Engagement.

began coding the transcripts and entered the text into QDA Miner, a qualitative data analysis software program. Agreement between the researchers was calculated for 50% of the post-release data, that is, three of the six post-release interviews. Interobserver agreement ranged from 84% to 89%.

Results

Intake Interview

As mentioned earlier, each of the 38 Project RISE youth was asked to identify the top three barriers that they believed would affect their reentry. A total of 114 barriers were documented. The most frequently identified barrier ($n = 15$) was poor academic performance in school. Other barriers identified included history of poor attendance, absenteeism and dropping out, previous placement in foster care or with a child welfare agency, and a lack of anger management skills, which were identified 13 times each. Interestingly, none of the youth with special needs viewed maintaining a job, homelessness, previous or current pregnancies, family responsibilities, history of mental health issues, or lack of independent living skills as barriers during the intake process.

Focus Groups

Youth with special needs indicated that their time in the facility gave them a chance to reflect on past barriers they had encountered in their life and plan solutions for the future. They found the transition course and its curriculum "helpful," "interactive," and "needed." One youth explained that in this course, "the focus is on us more than other classes. It is focused on our future." Another said, "It helps us be focused and ready and prepared for release." Three major themes emerged related to transition activities within the facility, influences on transition/reentry, and perceived barriers to transition/reentry. These themes are discussed under the "Common Themes" section of this article.

Post-Release Interviews

Post-release interviews gave vital information on perspectives of reentry and the barriers youth experienced in the process. The three youth who were productively engaged were employed and had earned either a traditional high school diploma or a General Educational Development (GED) certificate. Two of the three youth who were not productively engaged had recidivated or returned to incarceration. Both of the youth admitted to

current drug use, not completing school, and not being employed. The third youth who was not productively engaged did earn a high school diploma while in the facility but was not engaged in school or work after release.

Although the choices and life experiences were diverse for each of the youth interviewed, several common themes and codes consistently emerged throughout these interviews, and stark differences were evident in the youth who were productively engaged and those who were not productively engaged.

Common Themes

Each youth voice provided a unique perspective on reentry through examination of initial intake interviews, focus groups, and post-release interviews. Findings from the focus groups and post-release interviews presented a deeper understanding of reentry and its challenges as perceived by youth with special needs. The perspectives of youth within the JJ facility and through the reentry process related to five main themes: (a) barriers, (b) influences, (c) attitude, (d) hope for the future, and (e) resilience (see Table 4).

Barriers. In all three tools used in this study—intake, focus groups, and post-release interviews—the theme of barriers repeatedly emerged. As indicated previously, when given a list of 20 potential barriers, the most frequently ($n = 15$) stated barrier to reentry success was a history of poor academic performance. When asked in open-ended questions during focus groups about what barriers youth anticipated, most youth with special needs (five out of eight youth) verbalized that their biggest challenges would be the environment from which they came. Specifically, participants were concerned about exposure to negative family influences, drugs, and gangs. One of the focus group participants explained, "I know if I hang around the same people that nothing will change. I'll do the same thing I've always done." Another said, "I can't hang around my family members." Yet another replied, "I can't go back to what I mostly know. I was homeless for a long time. I can't be hustling the wrong person, I need to be doing something that takes more brains to do it the right way."

When reflecting on the barriers they encountered during reentry, the post-release youth who were productively engaged discussed facing some of the same challenges. When asked if they had contact with family or negative peers they had identified as barriers, one participant replied, "No I don't talk to anyone. Try to avoid them as much as possible." Another said, "I pretty much, no longer have a 'want' to see any of the people I used to hang out with

Table 4. Examples of Participant Responses by Theme and Category.

Theme	Category	Participant response
Barriers	School-related	"I can't blame you guys for me not going to school right away."
	Job-related	" . . .I didn't have like a job or anything."
	Going back to same environment	"it's all because my adopted mom just would not give me what I needed to finish the application."
	Drugs	"I am doing drugs"
	Gangs	"My first family, like, I guess, my gang."
Influences	Positive people	"If you are surrounded by nothing but positive influences, I mean, positive people and positive things, you're more likely to become positive yourself."
	Negative people	"My first family, like, I guess, my gang."
Attitude	Positive personal attitude	"I could make a difference."
	Negative personal attitude	"All of this stuff is just pointless, it's stupid"
Hope for future	Hopefulness	"I'd say very hopeful for my future."
	Hopelessness	"Nothing is going to change."
Resilience	Self-determination	"Ya, I'm pretty proud of what I made it to be, and so now, to me at least, it kind of symbolizes me . . ."
	Having a goal/plan	"They have to have that motivation. They gotta find that motivation, if they don't have that motivation"

in the uh back in the 'gang days'." Another youth considered not productively engaged also cited negative family relationships as a barrier, stating,

> my adopted mom wouldn't give me what I needed to finish the [Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FASA)] application. So, she wouldn't give me her tax information for FAFSA, and so because I couldn't fill that out, I couldn't go [to college].

A crucial aspect of self-determination (Wehmeyer, 1995) and resilience (Doll & Lyon, 1998) is the ability to bounce back from adversity or to overcome barriers. How these youth with special needs responded to the barriers and difficulties they encountered during reentry played a vital role in their

ability or inability to become productively engaged. One youth who was productively engaged explained this approach to barriers, stating,

> So, I mean, my thing would just be, you know what I mean, if something doesn't follow through, you know what I mean don't give up, look for that next available option. And just keep pushing, 'cause, not everything, you know what I mean, works out.

Influences. Researchers identified several positive and negative influences throughout the focus groups and post-release interviews; these included family, peers, and goal setting or a commitment to change. When supported by positive family influences and peer relationships or when demonstrating a commitment to change, a youth's ability to navigate reentry increased. Conversely, negative family relationships, peer influences, and no commitment to change affected the progress the youth made during the reentry process.

Relationships with family and friends seemed to be a major influence in reentry success or failure. For example, one of the productively engaged youth said, "If you are surrounded by negativity, it's easier to fall into negativity, if you surround yourself with nothing but positive influences, I mean, positive people and positive things, you're more likely to become positive yourself." Another productively engaged participant concluded, "My family, they're all, you know what I mean, jailbirds and stuff, and I just, I didn't want that for my life, you know what I mean? I knew I could amount to more, I could be something more." In contrast to the productively engaged youth, the two youth who recidivated discussed their commitment to maintaining the negative or unhealthy relationships that influenced their lives prior to entering the JJ facility. One not productively engaged youth spoke about allegiance to "my first family, like I guess, my gang." Only two of the productively engaged participants were living with supportive family members. One participant was living with his or her parents and the other participant was living with his or her grandmother. Two other participants, one productively engaged and one not productively engaged, were living with their boyfriend, girlfriend, or friend.

Another influence that youth voiced was related to goal setting. For example, one of the focus group participants stated, "I am trying to think about farther beyond [facility name]. You gotta think about what you want to do." One of the productively engaged youth said,

> Me, personally, I always wanna strive to be better than I was . . . I'm always gonna strive to become something better. Ya know? I'm not gonna live up to a standard, I'm gonna set a standard. And, that's the way I look at things. You're

> always gonna evolve, and if you're not trying to evolve, then you have a problem, cause you're just gonna stay stuck.

When productively engaged youth were discussing goal setting, a commitment to change was also evident in their responses. For example, one participant explained, "I just didn't want that for my life, you know what I mean? I knew I could amount to more. I could be something more. I could make a difference." Another explained, "Once I realized the opportunities that could come out, you know as a result of the transition, I then start to take it a lot more serious, I became very committed." He or she went on to say, "I came to the realization that my previous life really left no room for any opportunity later in life. It could only go downhill from there." The third productively engaged youth also voiced a commitment to change, saying,

> I hope to not make the same mistakes my parents did. I want to be able to actually get like an education to be able to hopefully start my own family some way in the future to be able to make sure my children don't have to go through what I did.

On the contrary, the two not productively engaged youth who recidivated readily acknowledged an inability to imagine a different outcome for themselves. One explained, "I knew I wanted to like smoke weed when I was in there and just go back to my old ways."

Another contrast between the participants who were productively engaged and those who were not was the expression of future goals or plans. For example, one productively engaged participant stated, "I want to be able to actually get like an education." Another explained,

> I want to continue my education through like university or a community college, whatever will take me into their school. And, as I'm going through school, I want to keep the job I have right now, and then hopefully get some internships as I'm going through, [and] end up working at those places I intern at.

In contrast, the youth who were not productively engaged did not voice plans for the future. They both stated that their focus was on their gang and/or drugs. At one point, when asked whether they were concerned about their future, one of the participants who had recidivated responded, "No. Not really. I have, I mean family over in prison; I got friends, they come out fine. It doesn't really affect me."

Attitude. Attitude toward barriers, reentry, and future life goals was clear in all youth voices. The participants who were productively engaged expressed

positive personal attitudes throughout their interviews, making comments such as "I keep my head up," "I knew I could amount to more," and "I always have a positive attitude." One participant explained the importance of having a positive attitude:

> I found a way to motivate myself. I found a way to get up every day, and just try to be the greatest person I could be. I tried to live with no hate in my heart. I mean, forgiving and forgetting things, it really helped me.

In contrast, the two participants who recidivated responded to questions about family or reentry services with a clearly negative attitude, stating, "I don't care about them (family)" and "Why should I care? All of this stuff is just pointless, it's stupid."

Hope for the future. At the conclusion of the post-release interview, youth were asked about their hopefulness for the future. One youth said, "Based off of how I was before the program, I'd say very hopeful for my future. I feel stable where I am." Even the youth who had not recidivated but was considered not productively engaged voiced the kind of hope he or she felt when reflecting on the meaning of a tattoo he or she gave himself or herself, explaining,

> It was just supposed to remind me that my life may be crazy, but it kind of, in a weird way, gives me hope. That I'm not going to be in this place forever. I mean, because it's not somewhere I'd want to be for the rest of my life.

When asked about hope, one of the two youth who had recidivated responded, "I'm trying to better myself and my hope is pushing me to try harder," while the other said, "I'll just be successful as me. I'll be successful doing what I know how to do. Um, all those other things you guys are trying to make me do, they're stupid, they're pointless."

Resilience. Throughout the focus groups and the post-release interviews, participants frequently alluded to the concept of resilience. When discussed in the focus group, many of the youth referenced resources they had in the community, "I have a whole sheet on people and phone numbers that can help me," and resources they had through the facility, "case managers, parole officers, and stuff" that could help them if they got "stuck" after release. In the post-release interviews, when asked what helped him or her succeed, one productively engaged participant responded, "Knowing your mistakes, and not being like afraid to admit what you did like just accepting what you done,

and try to move on from it, and being able to know that you can plan what your future holds." When one of the other productively engaged youth was asked what advice he or she had for others to be successful, he or she said,

> They have to be able to want it. They have to be able to want to go out there and get it. They have to have that motivation. They gotta find that motivation, if they don't have that motivation. They just gotta go out there and they gotta get it. They gotta get up every day, you know what I mean, and shake off whatever happened yesterday.

For this youth, resilience was not just about motivation, it was also about persistence: "You gotta have a plan A, you gotta have a plan B, you gotta have a plan C, you can go drop a whole alphabet just in case one plan doesn't work out."

Differences between intake interviews, focus groups, and post-release data. The intake interview was the first encounter between the youth and the transition specialist. The youth had to identify three most challenging barriers by responding with a numerical ranking of 1, 2, and 3, rather than with a detailed verbal statement. It was useful to identify the primary challenge faced by this population, but it could not capture all that a youth was thinking or feeling. The barriers youth identified later as significant in the focus groups and post-release interviews were not the barriers viewed as important during the intake process. Youth with special needs demonstrated increased knowledge and awareness about what they would need (e.g., contacts, structure, positive environment) when they are released. Post-release data brought to light their insights and perspectives on employment, relationships, and the role of personal choice and self-determination in making responsible decisions.

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to listen to the voices of youth with special needs as they express their concerns and perspectives about reentry at three different points in time—intake into the facility, during incarceration, and after release. Clearly, the perspectives on reentry that these youth held evolved over time. By only obtaining information at intake, which is a common practice in JJ facilities, effective programming for reentry is limited. It is important to develop a comprehensive understanding of barriers and needs by listening to youth voice at various points in time. In addition, the five themes—barriers, influences, attitude, hope for the future, and resilience—have significant implications for improving transition programming to foster productive

engagement and outcomes. Youth perspectives on reentry offer further explanations as to why some youth with special needs are productively engaged and others are not. Those who were not productively engaged knew the reasons why they were not engaged and wanted the resources that were available to them. In contrast, interventions that focus on self-determination and positive choice making were commonly mentioned by productively engaged youth (McDaniel, 2015). This study supported the findings of Zaff et al. (2014), indicating that JJ youth show variations in their pathways toward productive engagement. Therefore, the need for person-centered programming for reentry is critical.

The results demonstrated that it was not the barrier itself that determined productive engagement; rather, it was the youth's attitude toward the barrier and his or her resilience in overcoming it (Zaff et al., 2014). For instance, several participants acknowledged barriers such as returning to the same communities that contributed to their incarceration, negative peer influence, homelessness, access to drugs, complicated familial relationships, and not having a good support system (Unruh, Povenmire-Kirk, & Yamamoto, 2009). Productively engaged youth showed a commitment to overcoming those barriers and used the support they received from the secure care facility and Project RISE. While the youth who were not productively engaged knew when they were in the facility that they would return to an environment and influences similar to what they experienced at the time of their arrest, they voiced no commitment to change those circumstances.

Personalized accounts from youth with special needs who have recently gone through the process of reentry can provide input for better transition services within the facility, in addition to support for post-release success. The consistency in relationship between the youth and transition specialist served as a motivational source of support for those who were productively engaged (Osher, Banks Amos, & Gonsoulin, 2012). Youth who used consistent support and connection opportunities provided by the transition specialist were more likely to be productively engaged, whereas the level of commitment to seeking supports for the youth who recidivated was minimal both inside and outside the facility.

Youth with special needs who demonstrated productive post-release engagement were able to articulate their goal setting and problem-solving strategies, share positive perceptions about reentry, and evaluate desirability of the outcomes of their actions (Wehmeyer, 1995). Increased attention to fostering self-determination in transition courses and services provided within the facility may provide improved outcomes for youth during reentry.

For youth who were not productively engaged, gangs, drugs, and negative influences were still persistent in their post-release conversations, indicating

a clear need for a balanced range of services and activities, like alternatives to gang involvement and activities to strengthen positive peer or social bonds.

Limitations

Several limitations must be considered when reviewing the results of this study. First, there were a small number of participants in this study. Due to time constraints, staff turnover, and logistical reasons, researchers could conduct only two focus groups consisting of eight youth with special needs in the JJ setting and six youth with disabilities post-release. Class sizes were small for the two transition courses being offered at the time of the study, limiting the number of youth in the two focus groups. The information obtained from these youth is specific to their personal experiences. Other youth experiences may be different and could add more depth to the results of this study. In addition, youth from only one JJ setting participated in this study. Academic focus, procedural guidelines, and implementation of programming would be different in other JJ settings, which would affect the results of the study. Thus, the findings of this study cannot be generalized to other JJ settings. Despite the limitations of this study, the information obtained from these youth with special needs is unique and valuable and adds to the knowledge and insights of JJ staff, administrators, researchers, and adults.

Implications for Future Research

Several opportunities for research have evolved from this study. First, a continued need exists for integrating youth voice into every step of the transition process. In addition, more research is needed to understand how to promote effective goal setting and problem solving for student success post-release. Finally, large sample studies are needed to develop an increased understanding of the role of self-determination in productive engagement for youth post-release. In future, researchers need to explore differences between the views of youth with and without special needs.

Conclusion

In summary, listening to youth voice provided unique insight as to how JJ-involved youth with special needs view transition/reentry programming, identify barriers, overcome or succumb to the barriers, weigh influences in their lives, and perceive reentry and resilience (Cole & Cohen, 2013; Grover, 2004; James, 2007). Person-centered transition/reentry programming, the use of a transition curriculum in the facility, and the importance of caring and

nurturing staff are critical (Griller Clark & Unruh, 2010; Mathur & Griller Clark, 2013). To help JJ youth with special needs successfully reintegrate into the community, individualized reentry services that address the unique challenges of each youth are critical to enhance their self-determination, problem solving, and decision-making skills.

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