

An Ethnodrama Exploring Staff Members' Perspectives on Building Community Partnerships to Support Youth in Restrictive Education Settings

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Abstract

This qualitative ethnodrama-based study explores the perspectives of four juvenile justice facility leaders on the role and impact of community partnerships in supporting justice-involved youth in restrictive settings. Despite existing literature on the benefits of community partnerships for youth, limited attention has been paid to their function within juvenile justice. Framed by an adaptation of Bakhtin's theory of dialogue and presented through ethnodrama, this study centers the experiences and perspectives of staff members working in diverse juvenile facilities across the U.S. Participants' reflections, gathered through asynchronous, open-ended written dialogue, emphasize how meaningful partnerships with schools, local organizations, and community-based agencies enhance educational opportunities, behavioral outcomes, and facility climates. Simultaneously, participants identify persistent challenges that limit such partnerships' effectiveness and consistency. This study underscores the necessity of sustained, adaptive, and mutually respectful community engagement. By presenting staff voices in conversation, this work highlights how partnerships—when thoughtful and contextually aware—can foster hope, promote youth agency, and support both youth and staff within systems often marked by marginalization. This research contributes to the sparse scholarship focused on juvenile justice educators and offers implications for policy, practice, and partnership design that better serve youth in restrictive settings.

Despite consistent declines in numbers over the past 15 years, the United States continues to have the largest justice-involved youth population (hereafter "youth" or "justice-involved youth") on the planet (Zeng et al., 2023; Rovner, 2024; Ryan, 2014). Specifically, the term "justice-involved" references children and youth who are "minors, reside in out-of-home placements (i.e., juvenile justice facilities), and receive their educational services within these placements" (Shelton et al., 2024, pp. 2–3). Reasons that youth may be justice-involved vary widely and include the commonly assumed legal reasons, such as being sentenced to such a facility by a judge, as well as other considerations, such as threats to their personal safety, educational needs, access to rehabilitation and treatment services, and temporary shelter care. Thus, juvenile justice facilities' functions and services vary widely, and they include long-term facilities, detention centers, group homes, residential treatment centers, acute/shelter care, and adult prisons (Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, 2025; Sawyer, 2019).

With thousands of justice-involved youth spanning so many different needs and facility types, the range of services and supports that these

youth need are diverse and significant (Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, 2025). In the midst of these extensive needs, community partnerships afford opportunities to provide critically important resources to justice-involved youth and the restrictive juvenile justice facilities that serve them, with examples including supports such as hygienic services, career training, and physical education activities.

Because "community partners" is a term that can be understood and applied broadly and might include those situated within and beyond juvenile justice facilities, we want to clarify our meaning. In this discussion, we understand "community partners" to refer to those who support justice-involved youth without being directly affiliated with the facilities themselves, though their supports may extend to those spaces. These collaborations have the potential to expand opportunities and possibilities for these youth and the facility staff who work directly with them, including possibilities well beyond conventional partnerships. This paper explores community partnerships that are in relationship with juvenile justice facilities; because youth benefit from—but rarely, if ever, coordinate—those partnerships, the

focus of this paper is instead on adults within these facilities. Specifically, the adults who are juvenile justice facility leaders whose perspectives and experiences are invaluable to understanding the advantages, limitations, and possibilities of these partnerships. This paper explores the following research questions:

- What benefits and challenges do juvenile justice facility leaders describe community partnerships having, in terms of affecting youths' and staff members' needs and experiences?
- How do these leaders understand community partnerships to affect the facilities' climates and youths' outcomes?

We introduce ourselves more in-depthly later in the paper, but we three authors are deeply committed to investigating these questions and how these partnerships matter. Stephanie is a researcher who works directly with juvenile justice facilities, and both Hank and Teagan work and provide leadership within juvenile justice facilities.

To explore these questions and to fully center the participant facility leaders' voices, this paper accentuates dialogue as a conceptual framework and, in order to highlight participants' perspectives more in-depthly, presents the findings section as an ethnodrama, which we explain later in the paper. We begin with a literature review that not only considers the importance of community partnerships but also emphasizes how irregularly such relationships are considered within the context of juvenile justice. Following that, we discuss how an adaptation of Bakhtin's theorization of dialogue serves as the conceptual framework for this paper. The methodology section introduces the context, data collection, and data analysis for the study, including a discussion of the decision to present the findings as an ethnodrama. Following the findings, there is a closing discussion that considers the implications of these findings and next steps relative to partnerships with juvenile justice facilities. Given the limited attention to community partnerships with juvenile justice—despite the advantages such partnerships might provide facilities and the youth they serve—this research provides an important and rare examination of what community partnerships do, including how they work and might work better, to advantage these marginalized youth and the adults who support them.

Literature Review

Despite extensive scholarship on the importance of community partnerships advantaging youth, there is limited explicit consideration of how community partnerships matter within the context of juvenile justice. Numerous studies accentuate the value of such collaborations for ranges of youth populations, including empowering youth of color (e.g., Bucholtz et al., 2018; Mason et al., 2024), supporting young language learners' needs (e.g., Young et al., 2024), and facilitating adolescents' good health choices (e.g., Schober et al., 2015). However, while scholarship on community partnerships specifically involving justice-involved youth is important, it is far less robust. Within the literature that is available, a significant portion is only marginally related. Danielson et al. (2013), for instance, discuss how community partners institute HIV prevention programs for teens, but only include justice-involved youth as a subset of the larger teenage population. Similarly, Marsiglia et al. (2019) explore community collaboration as key to substance-abuse intervention, which extended to but did not focus on juvenile justice. Jones et al. (2024) likewise group justice-involved youth within larger youth populations, while emphasizing community activism in response to the water crisis in Flint, Michigan. All of these studies are valuable, but in each case, justice-involved youth are tangentially considered as subpopulations who might benefit from such partnerships, rather than being the focus. And, relative to this paper, the adults who serve them are almost always absent in the research.

Shifting specifically to research that centers juvenile justice, a significant portion of those discussions emphasize policy reviews and recommendations for policy changes (e.g., Barnert, 2020; Chamberlain et al., 2012; Ott et al., 2011; Pearson, 2009). These examinations are again important, but they do not focus on the everyday experiences and realities that shape community members', youths', and staff members' relationships within and around these facilities. As an important exception to this trend, Barnert et al. (2015) explore incarcerated youths' perspectives on recidivism, including youths' emphasis on the importance of community partnerships both while in and after exiting their facilities. Goldman et al. (2023) also engage directly with youth, and through interviews, considered how intake screenings might support youths' substance-abuse needs. Other studies make recommendations

for juvenile justice facilities, including strategies for effectively equipping educators to teach justice-involved youth (VanderPyl, 2017) and for teaching legal advocates who represent these youth (Johnston-Walsh, 2022).

These studies are invaluable and shape juvenile justice research, both indirectly and directly, in important ways—including informing federal and state policy makers, community activists, educators, and attorneys who support these vulnerable and regularly marginalized youth. In particular, studies that directly incorporate youths' and/or community members' perspectives are instrumental, as this research connects findings to the perspectives and needs of those directly involved in partnerships that advantage these youth. This paper works to extend these discussions and fill a glaring gap by focusing on the often-omitted viewpoints of juvenile justice facility staff members—particularly facility leaders, as these are the individuals who are likely to work directly with both youth and community partners—and to learn from their experiences how community partnerships advantage youth and communities, or how they do not.

Conceptual Framework

To center facility staff's perspectives and voices, and to underscore the necessity of conversation in building and maintaining partnerships, this paper's conceptual framework adopts aspects of Mikhail Bakhtin's theorizing of dialogue, specifically as discussed by Hynes (2014). Bakhtin's (1981) work is heavily invested in the structures and organizations of language itself, such as syntax, while Hynes' (2014) engagement with those concepts instead emphasizes language's effects. Informed by Bakhtin's work, we utilize Hynes's conceptualization because this discussion states that the "self is dialogic and always in relation to the other" (p. 73), emphasizing the degrees to which what and how people communicate is always in relationship with/to others' contributions. As individuals and groups interact, it is from the "web of interconnections [that] meanings are being continually generated" (p. 73). This inextricable connectedness between others produces a "co-generation of meaning," as what an individual offers is always relative to their understandings of and participations with others (p. 75). Within this paper, this framework represents a deliberate effort to create a literal dialogue between participants so that each individual's contributions take on even deeper and more substantial meaning and

importance when connected to and contextualized with others' perspectives.

Methodology

This paper is situated within a larger study, in which all of the participants have been actively involved, that explores ways to create and sustain positive climate and youth-affirming culture within juvenile justice facilities. Here, we focus on facility leaders who have been directly involved in and committed to fostering meaningful community partnerships as important to but excerpted from the overarching research.

Participants, Contexts, and Researchers

This paper is based on the responses of four participants, all of whom are leaders within their respective facilities, which are located in different regions and states of the United States. Over the course of multiple projects involving these participants, they have had opportunities to meet and discuss their respective facilities—but for the purposes of this paper they did not actually dialogue. Instead, they and we agreed to instead underscore flexibility and have each contribute separately, while understanding that the ultimate goal would be to put those contributions into discussion with one another, and having the opportunity to review the dialogue created from their respective contributions once they had been structured as a conversation.

Given the need for anonymity for the four participants, we cannot divulge detailed information about any one individual or facility, but we do offer a brief overview of each individual both below and at the start of the ethnodrama findings section. All peoples' and places' names are researcher-assigned pseudonyms. Each participant asked us to choose a pseudonym for them, so we did so and shared those chosen names with them as part of member checking, to ensure that they had no concerns or objections with our decisions.

- Aeron is a restrictive education facility leader who works in a residential facility that serves students from 2nd to 12th grade. She has worked in education, including with justice-involved youth, for over 20 years.
- Alaric is a restrictive education facility leader who works in a 24/7 facility that provides both shelter care and secure detention. He has worked with justice-involved youth for over 20 years.
- Emlyn is a restrictive education facility leader who works in a 24/7 facility that provides

secure detention. She has worked with justice-involved youth for approximately 15 years.

- Willow is a restrictive education facility leader who works across multiple facilities that provide juvenile residential care, detention, and prison. She has worked with justice-involved youth for over 20 years.

All three authors of this manuscript are involved in the aforementioned larger study emphasizing facility climates for the past three years. All of us have multiyear backgrounds involving juvenile justice. Stephanie is a university professor at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill who specializes in qualitative research methodology. Previously a high school teacher, she was a community partner who helped youth transition from local detention centers to alternative school settings and, when possible, back to traditional K–12 classrooms. Hank works in a juvenile justice facility in Montana. He began his career as a counselor for youth in the facility and now serves as the lead educator. Teagan is the principal at a different facility in Montana. She began her career as a substitute teacher, then became a science teacher and later an assistant principal, prior to her current role. All three of us are invested in the well-being of both youth served and adults working in juvenile justice facilities, and this research highlights that commitment by emphasizing the experiences, perspectives, and needs of the four participants who are leaders within their respective facilities.

Data Collection

Given that the four participants are in leadership roles in their facilities, with constant demands for their time and attention within their professional contexts, scheduling interviews or a focus group presented serious challenges. As our previous involvement within juvenile justice accentuates, no schedule or day is entirely predictable. Various situations within facilities, at a moment's notice, demand immediate attention, sometimes for extended periods. Thus, asking participants to fully commit to approximately an hour for an individual interview ignored these factors, and asking that all of them be available on the same day for the same hour for a focus group was logistically improbable. Therefore, data collection aligned with their needs and schedules and offered them the greatest degree of flexibility possible, while also being structured to encourage in-depth and detailed responses.

Given some participants' concerns with anonymity, Stephanie set up four separate, secure online documents, with a unique link for each participant. Each document provided an overview of the study, gave researchers' contact information if there were questions or concerns, invited participants to self-select pseudonyms (all asked that one be selected for them), and listed a set of questions that would have been asked in an interview or focus group but instead afforded them privacy, as well as the flexibility to respond to the questions when convenient and reasonable for them. All participants had at least three months to provide responses. Some chose to respond to different questions over the weeks, and all had the option to return to their responses and edit or add as they needed or desired, prior to the agreed-upon deadline.

The questions posed were designed to encourage participants to provide specifics, examples, and elaborations (Shelton, 2014), as the ultimate goal, which was communicated with them ahead of time, was to put their responses in "conversation" with one another. Examples of questions to which they responded included, "Tell me about the youth with whom you work. What do you want to be sure that I know?" and "Would you please share a few detailed stories/examples about a community partnership that either helped or hindered your facility and/or youth in meaningful ways? While you don't need to provide identifying information, please provide enough information that someone unfamiliar with the partnership can imagine and understand this example and why it's important." When participants had responded to all of the questions and were satisfied with their responses, they emailed Stephanie and let her know that they were done.

Data Analysis

Initially, the four individual sets of responses were analyzed using annotative thematic analysis (Shelton & Coogler, 2024). This process involved reading each document independently, and "literally marking the text in some fashion" (Shelton & Coogler, 2024, p. 31) while doing so in order to take note of responses that were particularly salient to the research questions and/or unexpected but applicable to the study. Once this process was completed, the next step was to again annotate the documents, this time attending to "overall connection[s] of the relationships and patterns within the data" (Shelton & Coogler, 2024, p. 42). The point was to specifically note

repetition across the four participants' responses based on initial reading and annotation. Through this process, the researchers found that the most logical means of organizing the data was based on the different ways that participants discussed community partnerships, such as their potential, effects, and challenges.

Ethnodrama

During the annotating, Stephanie noted how consistently the responses complemented one another. The goal had always been to emphasize dialogue, hence our conceptual framework, and the best means of doing so was ethnodrama, which literally structures participants' responses as a dialogue in the form of a script. Saldaña (2008) explains that "ethnodrama is a written, artistically composed arrangement of qualitative data using such dramatic literacy conventions as monologue, dialogue, and stage directions" (p. 196). The patterns found across a data set are "transformed into a script that is based on a plot," with the scenes communicating findings through characters' interactions and discourse, rather than more conventional research findings sections (Butler-Kisber, 2010, p. 138).

There are numerous advantages to presenting data through ethnodrama. First, this approach highlights "the voices, lived experiences, and beliefs" of participants in a structure that maintains entire sections of participant-provided responses, rather than having to excerpt, chop up, or otherwise paraphrase data (Mieniczakowski & Moore, 2008, p. 451). Second, the approach necessitates that data sources be thoroughly considered both separately and collectively in order to be able to provide both individual characters' dialogue and put characters in conversation with one another (Butler-Kisber, 2010). The point of ethnodrama is not simply to arrive at and present findings, but to instead have those findings in conversation with one another, literally and figuratively, in meaningful ways.

In terms of creativity in writing the findings script that follows, as stated previously, the majority of the script is full, direct quotations from the data, contextualized in ways that help to put the participants—as characters—in conversation with one another. However, there are moments that necessitated adding conversational interactions so that the script progresses logically and offers smoother transitions for readers. For example, the opening section features the participants/characters meeting one another. The participants provided the information about themselves that is provided

in the script, while the dialogue in which they greet one another was added to create cohesion to the overall presentation of the data. Thus, the creative license taken with the data was solely to help the reader appreciate the participants' contributions as actually in conversation, rather than as four disparate contributions. What follows are those findings, presented as an ethnodrama. The five acts are named based on the overarching patterns that were identified for that particular finding, such as Act II being focused specifically on the "power and potential of community partnerships" for juvenile justice facilities and being named accordingly.

Findings: An Ethnodrama on Community Partnerships in Juvenile Justice

CHARACTERS (all people and places have been assigned pseudonyms)

AERON, *restrictive education facility leader; works in a residential facility that serves students from 2nd to 12th grade; has worked in education, including with justice-involved youth, for over 20 years.*

ALARIC, *restrictive education facility leader; works in a 24/7 facility that provides both shelter care and secure detention; has worked with justice-involved youth for over 20 years.*

EMLYN, *restrictive education facility leader; works in a 24/7 facility that provides secure detention; has worked with justice-involved youth approximately 15 years.*

WILLOW, *restrictive education facility leader; works across multiple facilities that provide juvenile residential care, detention, and prison; has worked with justice-involved youth for over 20 years.*

ACT I: INTRODUCTIONS

Enter separately, Aeron, Alaric, Emlyn, and Willow.

It is a rare, quiet moment. The four individuals enter from four different directions, and all seem surprised to see the other three arriving at the same location. Despite unexpectedly finding others in this quiet location, they greet one another and sit comfortably in a shared space where they begin to readily talk and share. Such moments for sustained dialogue are nearly impossible for these four individuals, whose respective roles in and shared commitments to supporting and serving youth in restrictive settings demand much of their energy, time, and attention. Despite inevitable challenges within their facilities and in relation to their leadership positions, they are strongly committed to ensuring that justice-involved youth

have meaningful supports and opportunities—including by cultivating positive facility climates through meaningful community partnerships.

WILLOW (*sitting down*): I didn't realize that there were other people here, given how quiet that this place is. I'm Willow (*extends hand to the others*). I just came from a long day at Luminosity School (*jerks thumb in direction of facility from which she's arrived*). We serve a lot of different kinds of students there, including in residential care, prison, and juvenile detention, plus refugees, and students who are IEP-placed [Individualized Educational Plan], long-term suspended from school, or expelled. I just walked up here to rest for a few minutes.

ALARIC (*shaking hands with everyone and taking a seat*): I was just trying to get a minute away myself, but it sounds like we have a lot in common! I work at the Jackson Brice Youth Facility. It's both a 24/7 secure juvenile facility and, separately, provides 24/7 youth shelter care. (*Glances at a nearby stream and forest, and gestures.*) Too bad I didn't bring my rod—I'd love to go fishing. Or maybe go hunting. Love to do both. Never enough time for work or play, you know?

AERON (*also greeting everyone and finding a seat*): Hello, everyone! In listening to all of you, it's incredible that we all happened upon this place at the same time with so many overlaps in what we do. I work with students (*points in direction of facility from where she just walked*) who have had bad educational experiences. A lot of them come from involuntary homelessness or foster care situations, most need special education services. But they thrive on positive interactions with teachers and staff in our facility. And actually, Alaric, our students would love to join you in enjoying the outdoors! They love playing games, sports, cooking, and being outside!

EMLYN (*greet the group and happily takes a seat with them*): It's really wild that we're all here at the same time, with so much in common! Honestly, I could talk all day about the kiddos in the facility where I work. They truly are amazing and have overcome so much adversity. So many of the students enter our school without having attended other schools regularly, if at all. Their records are a mess, many have IEPs, others need IEPs but haven't been in school long enough to receive one. But, I agree with you, Aeron, having consistency, meaningful relationships with staff,

getting the support that they need—youth thrive!

ALARIC: So, we know that we're in similar contexts. What do you all do in your settings? I have a leadership role that involves supporting other teachers, and of course students, but I've also been a counselor and have been a teacher for many years.

EMLYN: Oh, I'm in a leadership position, too! You know, like you, I've had a lot of different roles, including teaching for years, and now I'm an administrator at my facility.

WILLOW: Wow, we really do have a lot in common! I'm an administrator, too, and I support multiple facilities in my role.

AERON: Geez, I've also had a range of roles. I'm in a leadership position just like the rest of you, but I was also a teacher, was a consultant for special education teachers and programs, and am an administrator now, too.

ALARIC: Since we all have so much in common in terms of our professional roles, I wonder if we also have shared experiences and commitments in terms of the students we serve? I'll bet that we do.

EMLYN: Oh my goodness, I seriously could talk all day about the youth! They truly are amazing. Their stories make you cry, and they really did my first year teaching. I entered the field rather altruistic and naïve. Now, though, as I've gained experience, I try to be in the classrooms as much as I can. Before coming here and meeting all of you, I spent the day with our 8th graders. We listened to music and created cards. How fun! In the years that I've worked in restrictive settings, I've found that the youth desperately want to be kids. So, I invest time in building relationships with them.

AERON: Oh my goodness, YES! You're so, so right, Emlyn! The youth thrive on positive interactions with teachers and staff. They love it when we point out their strengths. Like you described, we coordinate opportunities and programming that help promote a positive learning environment. And, I mentioned earlier, Alaric, that our students would love to hunt or fish with you—our facility is a residential campus, and the youth love playing games and being outside.

ALARIC: I agree with both of you about the youth. A lot of them come from challenging

backgrounds. They might be placed in our facility by local, state, or federal court systems, or other localized organizations that represent neighboring historically marginalized communities. We have students arrive who have been out of the school system for, possibly, several years, and so we focus on supporting them, getting them caught up. We provide them opportunities, rather than focusing on any negatives. But there are a lot of realities that youth and we have to navigate in doing that work.

WILLOW: Yes, Alaric, those challenges and the commitments to supporting the students are all real and ongoing. I mentioned that we have a refugee student population, for example. Practically, that means that there are usually over ten languages being spoken across the sites at any time. In addition to learning needs like you all mentioned, such as students being multiple grade levels behind in reading and math, nearly 100% of them being off-track relative to credits that they need to graduate, we still focus on their needs and strengths, and over 90% of them earn a high school diploma. I cannot overstate how proud that we are of those students and how hard that they work to accomplish something that for so many might otherwise seem impossible. You know, though, in listening to all of us, and in celebrating all that our students accomplish when there are so many challenges, and how important that relationships are to making those positive outcomes possible, I also think about how many people are involved in those moments of celebration.

ALARIC: Absolutely—and not just in the facilities themselves, either, but connections that stretch beyond them, too. Our facility, for example, has so many community partnerships. We work together with so many different entities to help these youth in the most effective and comprehensive ways possible.

EMLYN: Completely agree. We are proud of our community partnerships, and those relationships contribute to positive and important student outcomes.

(All four nod and vocalize strong agreement.)

ACT II: THE POWER AND POTENTIAL OF COMMUNITY PARTNERSHIPS

AERON: “Community partnerships” mean so many different things to different people. For us, we have a main partner, which is primarily because our school is an on-campus facility, and for years we have

had a positive relationship with that partner. That partnership means, for us, day-to-day collaborations that help to ensure that students have appropriate supports for their individual needs.

EMLYN: What’s that everyday work look like?

AERON: Well, we have weekly meetings during which we discuss students’ academic and behavior progress. And we work hard to provide support within the current school setting and future learning environments, both to ensure that we know what students need with us and what they’ll need for success if they transition from our facility. The bottom line is that communication is the key to success for our students, and that means lots of different adults connect and discuss regularly to build partnerships to help make that happen.

WILLOW: Yes—a number of our partnerships are focused on supporting students relative to their success within and beyond the facilities that I work with. For example, I work with other leaders who, like me, serve and lead multiple juvenile justice facilities. My colleagues and I meet regularly with these other leaders, with one monthly, with one every quarter, and with another about twice a year, and one of the discussions that we have is how federal funds will be distributed, because we want those decisions to be made collaboratively. And then there are partnerships with many community organizations, which include health departments, youth-serving agencies that offer services on topics like anti-violence, STI [sexually transmitted infection] and pregnancy prevention, job skill development, adult living skills, and to support those who need them, English language literacy services and U.S. citizenship classes. Honestly, these partnerships are incredibly valuable, because they help us to address whole-child efforts that we simply don’t have the budget to provide. By working with these community partners, students learn about essential concepts like preventing at-risk behaviors and soft job skill development. Plus, these connections support staff, too, not just youth, because what the youth are gaining assists with behavior management and academic support in the classroom and the facility.

EMLYN: Completely agree with both of you! We are proud of our community partnerships and how these longstanding relationships contribute to positive student outcomes. We work with a variety of partners so that we can provide supports that include dual enrollment

[a program that allows students to concurrently earn high school and college credits], vocational certifications like OSHA [the Occupational Safety and Health Administration], along with needs like socioemotional learning and restorative justice. One of our biggest relationships is with a local college. Students earn college and high school credits toward graduation, plus students can also take coursework in vocations like welding. Students even get to walk over to the college—which is a big deal to walk right out of a juvenile justice facility—so that they get an authentic experience at the annual job and college fair. Our facility's security is obviously still there, in case we need them, but they're discrete so that the kids can be in the moment. We also have opportunities for vocational training through a local extension office [a local office that provides practical information and programming on topics like agriculture and occupations]. Students can take courses there, too, and earn various certifications that are useful to them within and beyond the facility. So, they can potentially use those certifications when they transition outside of the facility, but we also have wonderful opportunities here, too. We currently have a farm, horses, chickens, goats, a beehive, gardens, greenhouses, an auto and welding shop, and even a crocheting program. Those partnerships help to support these wonderful efforts—which I want to accentuate weren't always available here. There was a lot of work. But now? We have forklift certifications and tractors operating in the garden on a regular basis. All of these programs, all of the work here in the facility, all of the connections beyond it have helped to shift the climate in really important ways. These changes and relationships have opened so many doors for us as a facility and have significantly contributed to positive youth outcomes! Each student is welcome to join culinary arts, welding, auto, no matter what their crime. To circle back to what we were discussing earlier, some of our most violent kids turn out to be our best students—when they're provided an opportunity. The kids thrive.

ALARIC: It's so great to hear about all of the partnerships that you all have! Our facility also has many community partnerships. Like Aeron was describing, we have partnerships with other divisions and departments within our state, and those include the District Court, Justice Court, Sheriff's Office, County Attorney's Office, and Public Defenders Department. Some of those relationships are logistical. So, for example, if a

youth needs to make a scheduled appearance in court, or a youth needs to leave our facility for a medical or dental reason, our facility does not do transports, so we rely on some of these agencies to safely and securely transport the youth to court. We also work with private food service companies so that the youth in our care get healthy meals that adhere to national guidelines. Got a little jealous, Emlyn, as you described your farm and garden! But, this is an important relationship that directly affects our youth. We have a wonderful and long-term relationship with an organization that facilitates outdoor recreational activities as in-school programs for the youth. I mentioned earlier how much I love the outdoors, and I love this partnership, too. There were concerns early on about what it would mean to have our kids participate in outdoor recreational opportunities, but we worked with this partner, and we created clear guidelines for the youth that include things like a safety test and clear behavioral expectations. These recreational activities even have competitions, and our students get to compete and have opportunities to potentially earn college scholarships. And these recreational opportunities are invaluable to the youth—they learn focus, self-control, discipline, patience, and life lessons required to be successful in the classroom and in life. We also have a creative writing partnership. The partner provides creative writing lessons for the youth in both secure detention and shelter care every two weeks. That partnership has actually linked up with other partners, including a nearby public library, and those two relationships got synthesized to coordinate specialized STEAM [science, technology, engineering, art, and math] lessons for our students. Without these community partnerships, of which these are only some, our building would not be able to operate.

ACT III: POSITIVE FACILITY CLIMATES AND COMMUNITY PARTNERSHIPS

AERON: I love all of these different relationships that we have, and I'm sitting here thinking about all of the ways that these connections improve the climate of each of our facilities. I mean, our partners allow us to have on-the-spot collaboration to ensure that students have what they need emotionally, which is huge in supporting them and improving everyday experiences for youth and staff. Plus, if students are struggling, we can communicate with our partners, and we can work together to find the nurse, therapist, or mentor that each youth needs, or offer therapeutic breaks and sensory time for

students when that's helpful. These are all huge advantages that benefit everyone—and that help our facility's climate to be one that centers youths' needs and helps to ensure that there's a consistent mission and vision of helping our students through trauma and providing what they need.

ALARIC: Yes, to all of that. It's incredible how much these partnerships matter in the everyday climate, isn't it? I remember one time, we had a recreational activity for the youth—and they absolutely *loved* it, it was so powerful and meaningful for them, but it required a *lot* of resources. And we couldn't afford that equipment. A community partner graciously donated so much of the equipment that we needed for that program. And, multiple local businesses also supported the effort through money or equipment. Hundreds of pieces of equipment and thousands of dollars. And being able to keep that program going makes a huge difference to these youth, in terms of both their behavior and staff members' relationships with them. Those partnerships help make something monumental manageable and sustainable, and allow our youth wonderful opportunities and chances to connect with peers in their age group, inside and beyond this facility.

EMLYN: Oh my goodness, YES! These partnerships are eye-opening experiences and a benefit to the facility climate! One of the best things that happens for us is bringing those partners to the facility to visit and to give presentations. We've been creative and invited all sorts of partners: real estate agents, bankers, trauma-informed yoga instructors, ambulance crews, and even food-truck owners to be on our campus. Students shake hands with the presenters and thank them for carving out time to meet with them. And community members get to see how wonderful that these youth are. I mean, the facility is a "correctional" facility, so we're intimidating. But partners get to interact with youth in positive ways that continue to build connections and relationships. That's huge for creating and sustaining relationships, and for shaping the climate and reputation of this facility.

AERON: Oh, I love creating agency and empowerment for the students! It reminds me of something that we've done in our facility: We've had student-led conferences. During the conferences, students meet with teachers, therapists, and case managers. This gives students the opportunity to share their experiences and discuss their progress

and test scores. Alongside this, we have community partners helping students through activities like therapeutic walks and sensory breaks. Every day is different, based on students' needs.

WILLOW: These are great examples of ways that these relationships support students and help our facilities. I mentioned this earlier, but these partnerships really help us to address whole-child needs, and that's really valuable to climate. We work with different local businesses to develop job skills and organizations to encourage adult living skills. Those elements are definitely important for when students transition out of our facility, but they also help behaviorally in the classroom, and some of these connections also provide academic support. Those are critically important to the students and to our facility's climate.

EMLYN: I really appreciate how positive partnerships can be, and how much of a difference that they can make for staff and students. However, there are definitely challenges for us sometimes. What about all of you?

ACT IV: THE CHALLENGES OF COMMUNITY PARTNERSHIPS

ALARIC: (*laughing*) Oh, I'm confident that we all deal with challenges!

Willow and Aeron join in the good-natured laughter, and Emlyn joins them in relief.

WILLOW: Emlyn, do you want to start, since you brought it up, and then we'll share, too?

EMLYN: So, one of the funniest challenging partnerships, and it wasn't even "challenging" in the way that I initially meant, was when we worked with a state wildlife group. They brought a mountain lion into the gym to dissect it.

Others seem stunned, and Emlyn laughs in response.

It smelled SO BAD, and we have tough youth in our facility, but start dissecting animals, and all of the "tough" kids end up queasy.

The four laugh together and share looks and sounds of disgust.

But aside from that moment, I have to say that one of the biggest challenges for partnership is always the beginning. Sometimes it's hard to initially get people on board, because since we're corrections,

we're intimidating. For example, we're the favorite site for one of our partners now, but when we first started, she was VERY hesitant. Related, we've shifted a big part of our community partnership building to focus on helping visitors to feel comfortable, as we adapted our practices based on previous experiences. For example, we don't host presentations in the housing units anymore, because guests don't typically feel at ease there. Instead, we reserve a conference room, provide coffee and snacks, and work to make it a special experience. Basically, our attitude is that we're using the same approach that you would use in your home: make introductions, be gracious, and so on, always.

AERON: I really appreciate the ways that you're thinking about the challenges and how you might respond to them. So smart. We do that, too. One of our biggest challenges is communication. We don't, for example, know specifically what to communicate to partners to help ensure that students are prepared for school, and related to that, we sometimes face obstacles in ensuring that partner staff understand the dynamics of our educational environment. We're not always necessarily on the same page, such as everyone knowing that education should be a part of programming. Another challenge relates specifically to the youth. They have so many reasons to leave the facility, including court, doctors, family visits, and when they return to us, they're redirected to go back to school. When they return, they appear calm, but we have limited knowledge of what might have occurred outside of the facility. It would be wonderful to know what kinds of meetings that the students had and what we might look for, in case a student becomes dysregulated later. We don't go with them, so we don't know what they experienced or how it might matter when they return.

ALARIC: I totally get those challenges. One of our biggest challenges was, after we were approved for a very exciting recreational activity that we could provide to students regularly, we ran into locating a place where the youth in our care could actually participate in that activity safely. The activity was designed to be an indoor one for a more traditional school setting. There was an overarching assumption that we'd have a full-sized indoor gym, and we don't. We had to build new, additional partnerships to make one work and to have access to spaces where our youth could actually participate, both indoors and outdoors, based on availability

and weather-related needs. There are also everyday challenges, beyond this specific activity that we ultimately got up and running. Sometimes very logistical things, like availability of food. Our line staff often eat two or more meals on-site due to the duration of their shifts, and they cannot leave the facility during their shifts. We rely on partners for food shipments, and we often have problems with availability of certain menu items (and this was especially challenging during the height of the COVID pandemic), and sometimes orders don't include everything that we need to prepare our meals. Because we need to meet federal guidelines for these meals, if staff have to improvise the food based on what gets delivered (or not), we have to make sure that we're still satisfying those federal requirements.

WILLOW: Just like it was exciting to hear about all of the positive benefits, it's useful and reassuring to hear about challenges, too. For us, several of our challenges are related to job skill programming. For starters, it requires lots of paperwork. There's the added challenge of students' eligibility requirements to even access the services. Plus, because it's a grant-funded program, one of the mandates is follow-up of at least a year for students, and that can be difficult when some of our students transition between many placements. Kind of like you were mentioning, Alaric, there's an assumption that we're a standard school setting, and we're not. Another challenge is the differences in both the nature and level of collaboration between us and a partner. For example, one partnership is only available where there's crisis, and that's just not as effective in program planning and continuous improvement efforts as more consistent relationships could be.

ACT V: MAGICAL WISHES AND PARTING WAYS

The four begin to gather themselves, and a couple of them check their watches.

AERON: I guess it's about time to walk back to our respective facilities, huh?

EMLYN: Yeah, I think so. (*Others nod in agreement.*) But, before we do, let's part with something happier than challenges, huh?

The other three pause and smile in agreement.

ALARIC: I like that idea. What were you thinking?

EMLYN: Well, I was thinking about if we all had magical powers and could change any aspect of community partnerships, what would we do?

AERON (*involuntarily laughing*): I love that as a parting sentiment! Honestly, I wish that partners could understand the difficulty of providing for and engaging students when they don't want to be there. If partners could look at situations specifically through an educational lens, with that caveat in mind, that would help tremendously. Plus, something else that I wish that I could magically help partners to know is that our teachers provide learning environments with high expectations, but it can be very challenging when we don't know what's on a student's mind emotionally. It's connected to what I mentioned earlier—we just don't always know what's going on that's affecting the youth.

ALARIC: I really appreciate that point, Aeron. For me, it would be great to bring in more community partners that possibly employ folks who have been part of the [detention/justice] system themselves and have successfully transitioned into becoming productive citizens. I think that it would be helpful for youth to see that even though they [the youth and potential new partners] made mistakes in the past, their lives are not over. We actually coordinated with the adult prison to bring prisoners currently serving sentences for homicide to speak to the youth in one section of the facility. Many of the youth in that section were being held on charges that carry up to 100-year sentences. It seemed like many of the youth thought that there was no hope. And because of that, they'd acted out and been written up for numerous disciplinary reports. After listening to these prisoners speak about the realities of prison life, the youth realized that they [youth and the adult prisoners] still had hope. I think those sorts of partnerships and more like them can definitely have an important impact on many of our youth. And, I mean, as long as I'm thinking about magical powers, increased funding from the city, county, state, federal level, and any other sources would also be incredible. We're constantly limited by space and budget, in terms of what we can offer to youth.

EMLYN (*laughing*): Yes, funding! More funding! Aside from that, if I had a magic wand, I'd want to be able to take students off campus more often. I loved, Alaric, you describing ways that your facility figured out how to do that more with your

activities. We recently took one youth to breakfast because he had the best record for the year. He went with two teachers and an officer, and it was a GREAT experience. We prepped him ahead of time, because the youth often feel a lot of anxiety about being off campus, but it was such a wonderful outing! I wish that we could do more of that. What about you, Willow?

WILLOW: Honestly, that potential partners would do what they say, and that we would as well. Ultimately, our students suffer if there are these start-and-stop initiatives and partnerships with community partners. Often, our students have few, if any, options, and they need committed and trustworthy adults serving and supporting them!

The other three nod vigorously in agreement.

EMLYN: Well, thank you all for humoring me with imaging what we'd change, and thank you, too, for hanging out and sharing stories and perspectives.

The four create a chorus of agreement and gratitude, as they again shake hands. As they head off in their four separate directions, they wave and smile to one another with promises to try to meet up again in the future, and to continue to work to forge meaningful and sustainable community partnerships.

Discussion

The connections between these four participants' experiences and perspectives are invaluable in considering how important community partnerships are to justice-involved youth, the adults who work with them, and the facility climates in which they all interact. In reaching back to the conceptual framework, while we acknowledge that the actual data collection was not conversational, the participants' contributions accentuate the degrees to which partnerships are dependent on meaningful and sustained dialogue. Hynes' (2014) discussion of Bakhtinian dialogue emphasizes that "response is always relational" when it works well and sustainably, and that "the uniqueness of the position or space" is a core part of effective connections (p. 73). As the participants emphasized throughout their responses, one of the most essential and challenging aspects of community partnerships is having partners who understand and appreciate the particularities of how being in restrictive settings shapes needs and collaborations. As Alaric pointed out, not all community partners understand that juvenile

justice facilities are also educational settings where students earn school credits and have their learning needs met, just like minors in other contexts would. Partnerships that are framed within what Aeron described as an “educational lens” have the potential to not only extend the learning opportunities afforded within the facilities but to also support youths’ needs within and well beyond juvenile justice.

Related, community partners who assume that juvenile justice facilities have the same resources and structures as standard K–12 settings limit the potential of these collaborations. Emlyn noted, for example, that partners were uncomfortable meeting in the facility’s housing units—a feature that is necessary in these 24/7 settings but atypical for most K–12 spaces. While Emlyn’s facility adjusted to make partner visits a celebratory event that was beneficial to all, it is important for community partners to similarly adjust to ensure that these connections are mutually reciprocal and adaptive. Related, Alaric’s efforts to institute an invaluable recreational program encountered obstacles because of an overarching assumption that the facility would have an indoor full-sized gym, which is typical in most K–12 schooling. The success of the program, which was ultimately incredibly beneficial for the youth, was contingent on multiple new partnerships and community generosity—a happy ending, but one that again necessitated additional effort and adaptation from the facility in order to ensure that youth could capitalize on all that the initial partnership presented.

Another important consideration, in attending to the importance of these partnerships “always [being] in relation to the other” (Hynes, 2014, p. 73), is ensuring that they work in consistent and reliable ways. Willow emphasized that start-and-stop partnerships are particularly harmful to justice-involved youth. Certainly, no inconsistent partnership is particularly effective, but for youth who have diminished trust of adults and often have significant traumatic events shaping their relationships and assessments of others (Shelton et al., 2024), collaborations that are unreliable are potentially damaging for these youth in unique ways. Similarly, Willow and the others noted that conditional relationships are also problematic. If partners are only available when there are crises, or conversely when there are none, these particular youth and facilities cannot be consistently supported. Ultimately, partnerships not only work better when they are consistent, but within juvenile

justice contexts, that consistency helps to allay harm and build trust in important ways.

Partnerships are, as the participants emphasized while they imagined what they would change, *hope giving* when they are effective. Community partners who work to offer youth new perspectives relative to their restrictive settings are incredibly valuable. Emlyn described connections with a local college that offered students opportunities to not only go to and earn credits from the college—but to see a future for themselves that included college. Alaric shared how a recreational partnership involved youth in competitions that included chances to earn college scholarships, and how even youth with 100-year sentences can find affirmation and hope when connected with meaningful community partners. In all of these instances, these partnerships worked because they were deeply contextualized, relative to both the location and specific needs of the youth in these facilities. Well-meaning but disconnected and/or unreliable partnerships may not only create uncertainty and frustration, but possibly even generate trauma for these youth. Conversely, partnerships that serve justice-involved youth in meaningful ways not only empower both students and staff, but they have the potential to change youths’ lives and trajectories, and to support staff members’ commitments to ensure that youth have the best opportunities possible, within and beyond juvenile justice facilities.

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