

Developing and Defining Staff-Youth Relationships within a Juvenile Correctional Facility

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ABSTRACT

This study uses in-depth interviews to explore the relationships between staff and juveniles residing and working in a private juvenile correctional facility in the Midwest. Because staff play a key role in shaping the experience of incarceration and can influence the degree of rehabilitation or punishment carried out within the facility, this is a crucial dynamic to analyze for an understanding of juvenile corrections. Findings from the interviews demonstrate the importance of building trust as a basis for positive, rehabilitative relationships with staff. Most staff expressed the shared goal of rehabilitation for the youth; however, they differed regarding the best approach for achieving this. While previous research notes the value of a mentoring relationship between staff and juveniles for rehabilitative efforts; staff at this facility varied in their perspectives of the role they played and the correctional response they found most appropriate. Gender and age of the staff influenced these views.

KEYWORDS: juvenile, corrections, rehabilitation, qualitative

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LITERATURE REVIEW

The U.S. juvenile justice system was created to divert youth away from adult courts and corrections based on the perception that youth are unique from adults due to their age (Griffin, 2018). Youth are generally perceived as less culpable and in need of guidance compared to adults, and are therefore seen as having more potential for change (Agnew & Brezina, 2017). For this reason, rehabilitation has often been a defining feature of juvenile corrections compared to adult prisons (Agnew & Brezina, 2017; Griffin, 2018).

However, the emphasis on rehabilitation within the juvenile justice system has fluctuated throughout history. In the late 1980's through the early 2000's, alongside an increase in violent crime among juveniles, the tough-on crime movement led to harsher sentencing, particularly for older and more serious juvenile offenders (Agnew & Brezina, 2017). A zero-tolerance approach towards juvenile delinquency led to increased incarceration rates, which disproportionately affected youth of color (Kyere, Joseph, & Wei, 2020). Since the early 2000's, policies have attempted to reduce the punitive approach to juvenile justice and increase efforts on

rehabilitation once again (Fagan & Zimring, 2000; Bernard & Kurlychek, 2010). This shift came for several reasons including the expense of the tough-on-crime approach as well as evidence of its ineffectiveness for reducing delinquency (Agnew & Brezina, 2017).

But not all scholars and practitioners agree on a clear definition of rehabilitation (Goshe, 2019; Raynor & Robinson, 2005). For most, rehabilitation refers to desistance from delinquency, but for some practitioners and researchers, the goal also includes improving physical, mental and social health (Goshe, 2019; Raynor & Robinson, 2005). Although corrections has moved towards a rehabilitative focus, Goshe argues most rehabilitative efforts are too narrow and individualistic, failing to address the social structural issues that influence delinquency (2019).

Current rehabilitation efforts are further complicated by the fact some tension remains among corrections staff and policymakers regarding whether a punitive or rehabilitative approach is best (Schwalbe & Maschi, 2009). A recent meta-analysis of juvenile residential facilities found that a punitive philosophy persisted in these spaces despite official reforms to make juvenile facilities less punitive and more focused on rehabilitation (Sankofa et al., 2018). Sankofa et al. (2018) analyzed results from ten qualitative studies. In their meta-analysis, all studies found correctional staff relied on cognitive-behavioral approaches aimed at molding youth into “ideal citizens,” increasing empathy, law-abiding behavior, self-awareness, and conformity. Moreover, several studies in this meta-analysis found that staff did not feel supported or prepared to carry out programs and treatment they felt would be beneficial to rehabilitative efforts (2018). Many staff may “blend” the punitive and rehabilitative approaches in their work with youth, as seen by Schwalbe and Maschi (2009) in their analysis of probation officers towards delinquent youth (2009, p. 364). Because

attitudes of the correctional staff may not always align with research or political trajectories, it is crucial to analyze and understand the perspectives of those working directly with youth inside correctional settings.

In addition to policies promoting rehabilitative efforts, a recent study found that correctional staff have the potential to carry out rehabilitative practices in their everyday routine interactions with youth (Walden & Allen, 2019). Moreover, correctional staff can play a decisive role in whether the juvenile corrections experience is rehabilitative or not. Studies have demonstrated that staff can significantly impact whether youth have a positive and rehabilitative experience or one that is punitive, and even psychologically or physically harmful (Bazemore, Dicker, & Al-Gadheeb, 1994; Brown, Fine, & Cauffman, 2019; Marsh & Evans, 2009). Previous research demonstrates the significant potential among correctional staff to positively impact youth (Brown, Fine, & Cauffman, 2019). However, these studies also note the need for ongoing analysis of the attitudes and roles of staff (Walden & Allen, 2019; Farkas, 1999; Griffin, 2006; Marsh & Evans, 2009).

The unique dynamics between staff and delinquent youth can influence how youth experience safety, shape associations with peers, and impact rehabilitative efforts (Biggam and Power, 1997; Abrams, 2006; Marsh & Evans 2009). In a thorough evaluation of a newly implemented therapeutic model for juvenile corrections in Virginia, scholars found that among the perceived benefits of this model were consistent staffing and efforts among the staff to build rapport with the juveniles (Cleary & Brubaker, 2019). Another study found that even through routine, daily interactions with youth, ranging from informal conversations to staff-led group activities, staff had the ability to reinforce the “youth’s emotional safety and well-being” as a form of consistent rehabilitation (Walden & Allen, 2019, p.310). The importance of feeling safe and building

trust between staff and youth was explored in the current study as well.

Limited research has explored the benefits of a positive relationship between youth and staff; however, studies that do focus on this dynamic highlight the potential for these relationships to have a beneficial impact on youth. For instance, a study interviewing 373 incarcerated adolescent males between the ages of 14 to 17 found that youth who viewed staff as protective and legitimate were 14% less likely to experience violence in the facility (Brown, Fine, & Cauffman, 2019). These findings suggest the relationships correctional staff have with youth within correctional settings can have a strong influence on the outcomes of youth, including the likelihood of youth engaging in violent behavior (Brown, Fine, Cauffman, 2019). The current study builds upon these previous findings by examining the attitudes of both youth and staff within a juvenile correctional facility.

Whether staff will have a positive impact on youth may be shaped by the type of relationship between the youth and staff. For instance, Marsh and Evans (2009) note that the “mentoring or role model relationship framework is a promising means to further explore and understand the dynamics of youth-staff relationship within juvenile correctional settings” (p. 63). In their study of 543 incarcerated youth aged 12-22 years, Marsh and Evans found that those who perceived their relationships with staff to be characterized by a high level of trust, engagement, effective problem solving and positive affect, were more likely to view themselves as succeeding upon release (2009). Additionally, factors such as the type of correctional setting, age, and gender can influence staff attitudes. An earlier study of detention centers noted a strong tendency among staff to support a punitive, restrictive approach to detained youth in spite of efforts to become more rehabilitative as a facility overall (Bazemore, Dicker, & Al-Gadheed, 1994). This study also found male staff were more likely to support aggressive and punitive strategies

for handling youth compared to female staff, and older staff held less punitive attitudes than their younger counterparts (1994). These researchers concluded that, “the self-contained nature of total institutions” influence power dynamics, attitudes, and behaviors between staff and residents (Marsh & Evans, 2009, p. 60).

The role of gender within corrections is also shaped by the organizational structure of these institutions. As previous scholars have noted, correctional facilities are predominantly masculinized environments wherein the jobs of staff rely on physical strength and order maintenance (Griffin, 2006; Sankofa et al, 2018). Such masculinized spaces can create resistance towards female staff by both youth and staff within a facility (Griffin, 2006; Britton, 1997). Despite the existing literature, there remains limited qualitative research exploring the ways in which youth and staff develop relationships within a juvenile correctional setting. This study contributes to the understanding of how relationships develop within secure settings for youth and how staff view their role in corrections.

Future research is needed to assess how age, gender, and tenure within juvenile correctional spaces influence organizational behavior (Griffin, 2006, p. 16). The current study aims to explore these dynamics that influence staff and youth relationships within the correctional facility. Examining the attitudes of staff is necessary to evaluate how interventions within juvenile correctional spaces exist day-to-day amongst staff and youth.“ (Walden & Allen, 2019, p. 310; Farkas, 1999; Griffin, 2006; Marsh & Evans, 2009).

METHODS

The research was conducted in the Midwest at an all-male, private residential treatment facility that is considered low security. The research was approved by the University of California, Irvine Institutional Review Board in August 2017. Written permission to recruit interviewees was granted by the executive

director, who served as legal guardian of the youth who were wards of the state. The principal researcher conducted all interviews in person and transcribed audio-recordings verbatim. The second researcher assisted with analysis of the data after interviews were transcribed. Neither the primary or secondary researcher had an affiliation with the correctional facility or an existing relationship with youth or staff interviewees.

Upon arrival to the facility, the principal researcher made an announcement to both youth and staff in the facility regarding the opportunity to participate in the research. Nine youth ranging in age from 13-19 were sentenced to reside in this correctional facility for delinquencies ranging from minor offenses to armed robbery. Out of the nine youth who were interviewed, six identified as white, one identified as black, and two identified as Native American. Most youth are incarcerated in this facility approximately 9 months to one year. All youth who were in the facility for delinquent offenses were given the opportunity to participate on a voluntary basis and all those youth agreed to participate. A youth advocate was present during the youth assent process and throughout the youth interviews to ensure the rights of the juvenile participants were protected throughout the process. Both staff and youth interviewees were reminded they could stop the interview at any time and choose to refrain from answering any questions.

All sixteen staff in the facility were given the opportunity to participate in the interviews on a voluntary basis. Fifteen staff agreed to participate. Five of the staff interviewees were female and ten were male. Out of the fifteen staff interviewed, fourteen identified as white and one identified as Latina. The principal researcher conducted twenty-four in-depth interviews at the private juvenile correctional facility in the Midwest during the Fall of 2017. In total, nine youth and fifteen staff members volunteered and participated. Interviews were

conducted one-on-one with staff members. All interviews were conducted in a private room within the correctional facility and lasted between 15 and 70 minutes. Audio-recording was voluntary, and all respondents agreed to be audio-recorded.

Interview questions for the juvenile participants included “do you have any role models in your life,” “what do you think you are getting from being here,” “do you get along with the staff here,” “do people here act the same way with peers and staff” among other questions. Staff interview questions included “how would you describe your role here,” “how would you describe your relationship with the youth here,” “what do you think are the most important issues the youth in this facility face while they are here,” “do you try to foster friendships with the youth here,” “what are the types of role models the youth have in the facility” among other questions. Questions were open-ended and the researcher followed up participant responses with various probes, allowing the participants to delve more deeply into topics relevant to them.

Following data collection, the researcher transcribed all interviews verbatim and analyzed the data beginning with coding. Codes were then compared and grouped into themes. Both researchers coded the data separately and compared codes. The codes with the greatest intercoder consistency and significance to the study were used. Themes emerged from the data based on the frequency with which they were discussed in the interviews. The researchers relied heavily on the word choice of the participants to develop codes and themes. Themes that emerged included the significance of trust, issues with favoritism, role-modeling and serving as a parental figure. For example, to develop the theme of “significance of trust,” the researchers first recognized the consistent reference to “trust” in the interview data. Comments like, “they don’t trust anybody, they don’t want to be trusted” and “the whole thing is you have to have a basis of trust in

me” were coded as “trust.” Because safety was frequently mentioned alongside discussions of trust in the interviews, the researchers included safety within the broader theme of “significance of trust.” Themes were then connected back to previous research and analysis on staff attitudes and relationships to juveniles.

FINDINGS

Developing Trust with Staff

Many staff described developing trust and creating a sense of safety as central to their role in the facility and to the needs of the youth, reflecting their focus on rehabilitation. Similarly, the youth participants described factors that influenced their ability to develop trust with staff members and the benefits of doing so.

Interviews with both staff and youth revealed the important role life experiences and individual backgrounds play in developing security and trust within the juvenile facility. A staff member in the facility noted that youth “kind of interview staff just when they get here to make sure they can meet their needs and keep them safe.” Youth generally enter the facility lacking trust of the staff. As one line staff mentioned, when youth enter the facility, “they have so much going on in their heads they don’t trust anybody, they don’t want to be trusted, and they lash out to get attention or to get negative attention.” Another line staff explained his perception that trust provided the foundation for building relationships with the youth, he explained, “the whole thing is you have to have a basis of trust in me...once I lie to you, I lose all credibility.”

The relationship between trust and a sense of safety was evident in several interviews. One female staff member said, “These kids are sad and broken kids. They just need some positive, you know when they are here, they are safe. They are getting fed, they have a bed, there is a roof over their head, nobody’s beating on them, you know?” Similarly, a line staff

said that youth who enter the facility “start learning they feel safe,” as opposed to other treatment facilities where they may have to act “big, bad, and tough.” And another staff member discussed the efforts to ensure youth feel safe and secure in the facility, stating “If you’re hurt we’re going to take care of you and get you fed every day. It means a lot to them...and their own identity is something that means a lot to them.” Throughout the interviews, staff reflected on the role of creating a sense of safety for the youth through routine meals, preventing physical harm from others, and consistent responses from the staff. Lying to a youth or creating a sense of rejection could severely damage the trust needed to develop rehabilitative relationships.

But the at-risk youth in the correctional facility may have a particularly difficult time overcoming histories of abuse, neglect, and distrust of adults or peers, making it especially challenging to develop trust with staff. One male line staff explained that youth struggle “to find people they can trust, that they can open up to. They have to find that, and that’s very very hard for them to do...because if you turn around and reject them, they remember that, and they know it. And they will not trust you. It’s just the way they work.”

As reflected in the previous comment, even if trust is developed it remains vulnerable. Hurting the youth through a sense of rejection, or what might be perceived as going behind their back, can significantly undermine any trust or rapport. Another staff member commented on the fragility of developing relationships with the youth explaining, “it just drives me nuts that someone can ruin all your hard work with the wrong statement or something like that. And they don’t realize that one bad comment to those boys is going to stick a lot longer than 12 good ones, you know?”

A juvenile participant acknowledged the challenges of developing trust within the facility when describing friendships with other peers. He explained, “When you are here, it’s not like a rule but

an unspoken rule, you pretty much only want two or three friends. Because if you trust everybody in the group and you tell everybody everything you can expect to get your back stabbed a couple of times.” The fear of vulnerability and what might happen if you open up to other peers or staff was evident through many youth interviews.

A 15-year old participant noted his reluctance to develop trusting relationships with staff upon entering the facility as well. “Especially the females, they will help you but you have to give them respect first. They will completely disrespect you until you earn that trust.” His perception of the mutual need for respect and trust is noteworthy in this statement, particularly as he applies it to developing a trusting relationship with the female staff. Then, he explained when he first met a female line staff in this facility, “I thought she was a b----. Straight up, like I hated her, she could die for all I care. She pissed me off a lot. But I started talking around her and I got to know her a little bit. She was an addict like me...there are some people in this [place] like me [and] there are staff that I can honestly say, they do care and they honestly want to see us get better.”

The staff background, including shared challenges with addiction in this case, enabled this youth to develop trust with the staff member despite initial reluctance. Shared pasts were described by many youth as important for developing trust with other peers as well with statements regarding the “similar circumstances and like we have a lot of things in common” allowing youth to open up to other peers or staff members. The development of trust and the sense that she honestly cared was likely a necessary step for this youth to begin a process of rehabilitation.

Youth Relationships with Staff

Interviews with both staff and youth reflected the role of age and gender in influencing the level of respect and authority the staff members have over

youth. In terms of race and ethnicity, the staff members are predominately white but tend to operate out of a colorblind ideology when describing their interactions and relationships with youth.

One youth stated, “some people have like the respect your elders [mentality] and stuff ...it kind of depends on where you come from and what your values were.” A line staff reiterated, “a lot of these kids, they respect age, or at least most of them do.” He further explained, “my philosophy with these boys is you treat them the way you want to be treated, so it’s all about respect.”

Several female staff noted some male youth use their gender as a means to intimidate or manipulate female staff. One participant noted there was a physically large youth who, with the female staff, “would get real close to us, not in a sexual manner, but in an intimidation manner. And he would use his size, so we had to establish right away, back off. We had to call him out on it...we always have to be two steps ahead of their thought process, you know? In addition to physical intimidation, staff members noted the objectification of younger female staff by the male youth. For instance, a female staff member explained, “we have some younger female staff here and we definitely get boys that will treat them very poorly, you know, like a piece of meat. That has happened many times over the years when you get a young female. Because that’s what they know, ‘I’m a man, hey look at me.’” Furthermore, staff noted that youth in the facility seem to “take their cue from the movies on how men often should be and should be tough, strong, and in charge.”

Regarding race, staff argued against accusations of favoritism by race. Whereas some youth claimed this type of favoritism was occurring. Many staff expressed a colorblind approach towards working with the youth in the facility. One line staff noted “the biggest deal is whether they will think of you holding me to a different standard because I’m Native or because I’m black. To me it don’t matter.

There is no color.” Similarly, another staff member said “I don’t care if you’re black, white, green, yellow, brown, or purple with polka dots. It doesn’t matter any difference to me. I will treat you the same as I do anybody else. [But] they are like ‘no, because I’m this you should be paying attention.’ And I’m like no, that means nothing to me. You are here because you had problems and we are trying to help you fix it.”

Favoritism and Friendship

In the process of developing positive, supportive relationships with youth, some staff seemed to struggle with avoiding friendship and favoritism. While a few staff members felt friendships with the youth were beneficial for building trust and rapport, many argued friendships were discouraged within the facility. Many staff and youth interpreted friendships between staff and youth as a form of favoritism. This perceived unfairness could likely undermine efforts to build trust with youth who are not included. Both staff and youth interviews highlighted examples of favoritism within the facility.

For example, one youth claimed “there are certain people who will get away with a lot because they are looked at a bit higher and the staff don’t think they need to keep as much of an eye on them.” A line staff supported this notion stating, “I think there is a little friendship there but I’m not quite sure how thick it gets [between youth and staff]. I try to distance myself from them because they are here and I’m going home.” This staff member mentioned that other staff

will take them too much under their wing, and they are showing favoritism. Certain staff will say, well he’s my little buddy. And they would maybe buy him a pop, not the rest of them. And it’s wrong, you shouldn’t be doing that. You treat them all the same. That’s my philosophy anyway.

Reflecting the complexity involved in these staff-youth relationships, one youth explained some of his

peers will say, “I want this staff to see me. I want this staff to recognize me so I will put on this little front so I can get what I want, find a way to manipulate somebody or something like that.” This example demonstrates the way one type of relationship can be experienced differently by each participant. Where a staff member may attempt to develop a positive relationship with a youth, viewing their positive behavior as progress towards rehabilitation, the youth may view this as a manipulated dynamic.

Despite attempts to foster friendships with youth in the facility, there are efforts by staff to actively resist developing friendships with youth as well. Many staff did not see “friendship” as their appropriate relationship towards the youth, and felt it necessary to remind the youth of this. For example, when one of the juveniles came out as bisexual to his father while in the facility, his father reacted negatively and did not support his son’s sexuality. The line staff told the youth he fully supported him. He said the youth “wants the recognition of an older male, so he struggles and strives trying to be our friend. And I have to tell him I’m not here to be your friend, I’m here to help you, I’m here to guide you, I’m here to do all this other stuff. Because my ethical code, that goes against my ethics....No matter how hard you try to be, I cannot do that. And he doesn’t understand it, he’s still looking for that. He’s a nice kid, right? I’d love to be able to, but I can’t.”

Another staff member reiterated these feelings regarding their relationship to the youth, “You have to have that fine line here. You have to watch yourself. Like I told him I’m not here to be your friend, I’m here to teach. I’m here to try to help you work through your program. I’m not your friend.”

Despite the beneficial role of friendships in general, with their implied support and trust, this type of relationship was largely seen by staff and youth as unfair. While staff who attempt to develop friendships with youth may have the best of intentions for the youth’s well-being, this particular model may not be the most effective within a correctional setting.

Staff as Role Models and Parental Figures

The most positive types of relationships between staff and juveniles noted in Marsh and Evans (2009) study were those that resembled mentoring and role-modeling relationships. These scholars explain that role modeling and mentoring relationships between staff and juveniles may hold the most promise for rehabilitation (Marsh & Evans 2009). In the interviews with staff from the current study, multiple staff members expressed the importance of serving as a role model for the youth in the facility, reflecting the efforts of rehabilitation.

When referring to the struggles faced by juveniles in the facility, several staff members shared the sentiment that the “common thread is, for the most part, they don’t have positive role models in their life.” In particular, as an all-male juvenile facility, the lack of male role models in these youths’ lives was described as detrimental. While many experienced neglect from older male adults in their lives and simply had no one around to look up to growing up, other youth had been exposed to male figures who treated them poorly or failed to act as a positive role model in their life, according to the interviews with staff.

One educational staff member stated “they have never had positive role models. They don’t know what it means to be a man because they have never had anybody show them. Now most of them don’t have even a father figure, maybe don’t even know their dad. So, I think it’s really hard for them to become a man.”

Interestingly, more female staff than male staff noted the absence of male role modeling from the youths’ lives throughout the interviews. Several female staff noted, “they [the youth] have either never had a role model [or] no male figure. Nothing to look up to. Or the ones who have been at home have torn them down emotionally so far that they don’t even look for what it is supposed to look like.

What is a father figure, what is a big brother supposed to look like, you know?”

Because of the gendered aspect of this role modeling, some female staff felt limited in their ability to address this issue for the boys. Instead, they often described looking to their male co-workers to serve as positive role models for the boys and demonstrate what it means to be a good man. For instance, one female staff stated, “I can educate in that way, but they are young men who need the male role models, you know?”

In some cases, female staff saw good examples of their male coworkers for carrying out this role, while in other instances they felt the modeling the youth observed in the facility could reinforce negative behavior among the youth, such as yelling. A female staff noted, “these boys are desperately looking for male role models and at times you might get men in here that aren’t displaying the best behavior that somebody else might think it’s inappropriate for the boys.”

Another female staff member expressed concerns over some of the male co-workers’ behaviors with the youth, explaining “sometimes when they go off and they get loud and belligerent they are expecting the same in return. Because that is what they are used to. I yell, then you are going to yell louder... sometimes I will bring it up and other staff will say, well my dad yelled at me all the time and I turned out okay.” Reflected in this statement is the masculine role modeling this male staff member experienced as child, which then became the behavior he viewed as appropriate. It should be noted, some male staff who were interviewed were also critical of the negative examples of males working in the facility.

On the other hand, some male staff identified themselves as role models for the youth. For instance, one line staff said he tells youth, “I don’t know if I’m your role model or not, but I try to be. I try to be as positive about stuff as I can be [and] present positive solutions to the issues.” Another

male staff member explained he wanted to show the youth “what a man has to do to provide for his family, make a house payment. We do have male staff that can project that and help the kids. We have a few that are not good role models [too].”

Although female staff felt limited in their ability to address the lack of positive male role models in the youths’ lives, they described other types of beneficial roles they identified with in relation to the youth. These roles were often gendered for the staff and youth, such as female staff who identify their role as similar to that of a mother or grandmother. Like the rehabilitative potential embodied in role modeling, playing these parental and familial roles in the absence of their parents, is likely therapeutic and beneficial for the youth. Moreover, this approach aligns more closely with rehabilitative goals for the youth as opposed to punitive.

For example, one female staff member described an incident where she told a juvenile she was very proud of him for something he had done in class. She explained,

He sat there looking at me. And I said what’s the matter? And he wouldn’t say anything. And I said, has anyone ever told you that they are proud of you? He said the only one who tells me that is my mom. And I said, that’s okay, I can be like your mom and I can tell you that I’m proud of you. It’s okay. And I got to meet his mom and I told her that. So she understands that there is somebody there that finds something with this boy to get something with him, to give assurance, to build trust with. And when I say I’m proud of you, it’s not just the words.

I am very proud of what you did, you know?

For this staff member, identifying as a mother for this youth implies providing support, positive reinforcement of his behavior, and developing trust. Each of these qualities lends themselves to rehabilitative efforts.

Another female staff reiterated the familial role she felt she played for some youth in the facility.

Reflected in her comments is not only the influence of gender but also age.

I can’t tell you how many times somebody would say to me, would you be my grandma please? And I say, well thank you, I think, you know? They perceive my demeanor as being grandmotherly and that’s fine. I filled a lot of those spots for these kids. And we’ve cried a lot of tears over the years for a lot of things, neglect on parents’ parts. Mom is going to be here on Friday and all week we are waiting for Friday when mom is going to be here. Mom did not show. Now who feels that boy? Well grandma steps in. Or one of the other teachers steps in. Or one of the other females can step in there and if they will allow it you can fill a void there. Sometimes they won’t. And that further exacerbates their negative feelings

Here the staff member associates her familial role with providing an emotional outlet and support for the youth when their own family disappoints or hurts them. Sentencing youth to correctional facilities inherently creates a separation from potential familial support and can lend itself to scenarios described by this staff member where families have difficulties showing up at the facility during a designated meeting time. This can leave the youth feeling hurt or neglected and lacking in support. As described in this interview, the female staff then work to fill this void by playing the role of a grandmother or parent, and providing emotional support.

Additional Rehabilitative Efforts

In addition to adopting a parental or role-modeling relationship with the youth, many staff describe the positive, rehabilitative strategies they are focused on with youth in the facility. Several staff expressed their genuine interest in seeing the youth improve during their period of incarceration. Additionally, they focused on accountability, providing structure, and education as tools for the youth’s success.

The interest in seeing youth succeed was exemplified by one staff member's statement. Regarding the notion youth may perceive that he is working here for a paycheck, he explained, they "are very mistaken. I come here every day and my only goal is to make sure that you guys can get to a better life, you know? Like I said, it's such a good feeling when all the sudden you see in one day it finally just clicks. And I told them, I will never give up." This staff member states his clear goal of rehabilitation for the youth and describes his strong commitment to this goal.

Multiple staff also noted the importance of accountability for the youth's eventual success. For instance, a staff member stated, "the biggest part [is] getting them to take ownership for their actions...But when they take ownership it makes you look better in my eyes if you take accountability for your actions rather than say I didn't do it." Taking responsibility for one's actions was described as a central piece of the programming provided through this facility. Several staff members described it as important for the youth in their progress towards rehabilitation.

Another key aspect of rehabilitation for the youth described by many staff members was the role of structure provided by the facility. Some staff noted the consistent meals and security of having a bed to sleep in and a roof over their head, while others referred to the routine schedules in the day. Formal education classes provide much of the structure for the youth's days within the facility; however, many staff also noted the importance of the informal education provided through the daily interactions with staff.

For instance, one staff member explained

We have a responsibility to educate these boys. My education is down here. While you're eating, come on you don't put your face down by your plate and shovel all your food in. This is education. I take them out shopping. How do you act when you're out in public, when you sit

out in a restaurant? All of this education stuff it does make the classroom a little bit easier as well because they see us as teachers who are just teaching them how to do things.

Another staff member stated,

the educational side is as important as working [and] developing social skills...I think for our kids especially, is missing a math class or an American history class going to be worse than never learning a work skill? I'd rather see them out working than I would out in the classroom, personally.

Additionally, one staff member noted that the youth in the facility "have a loss of identity, well if they ever had it to begin with. They are struggling with what is supposed to be normal. Why am I not normal?" Although not part of a formal education, helping youth work through these questions of identity was viewed as essential to their potential success.

Overall, several staff, ranging from teachers to group leaders to line staff, reported viewing their rehabilitative role as providing structure, informal education, and emotional support to the youth to allow them to develop trust, a sense of identity, work, and social skills.

Punitive Role

Despite the many positive efforts and goals of most staff in the facility, the interviews revealed competing and contradictory views towards discipline, punishment, and rehabilitation within the facility. Several line staff spoke about the need for strictness and consistency when operating daily routines for youth. And interviews reflected gender differences in disciplinary styles.

A male line staff explained, "if you aren't consistent and give them a bit of leeway, [it's] mass chaos." Another staff member had previously worked in law enforcement and the adult justice system. He described his challenges adjusting from his "prison

mentality” to a juvenile facility. He explained, “things are treated totally differently from a juvenile facility to an adult facility.” Several staff spoke about the need to be “more strict with the kids,” to ensure staff are not seen as “coddling” youth while in the facility. Some older staff members described their discipline strategy, explaining “it’s always easier to start strict and then you can be more lenient.”

Discipline amongst staff members reflected the gender differences of those interviewed. While several male staff referenced “niceness” as a sign of weakness, several female staff critiqued the “constant yelling from...male staff” in the facility. Many male staff said being “nice” can be seen by youth as “waffling back and forth...when I’m strict, I’m strict, and the kids know that.” In contrast, a female educational staff member said she prefers to have a “softer tone” when speaking to the youth in the facility. She said she feels like “sometimes when they go off and they get loud and belligerent they are expecting the same in return. Because that is what they are used to. I yell, then you are going to yell louder.”

Age and tenure in the facility also influenced attitudes about discipline. Interviews revealed that staff, particularly older staff who had been working in the facility for several years or decades, held more punitive beliefs towards how youth and the facility should be managed. For example, one participant noted youth in the facility today “have no respect for staff...a lot of these kids I don’t think they respect themselves.” He further said, “sometimes I wish we could just go back to the old ways [where] it was a bit more hands on.” This staff member claimed in recent years youth are more able to hit staff without repercussions. He said “personally, just my opinion, they have more control and power than we have as line staff. Because they can do just about anything. But in years before, you did that, and you are down. And the kids realized it back then.” Similarly, another line staff argued that youth know and exploit the fact that staff cannot retaliate. He said “they know nothing will happen to them if they hit the staff, if

they kick the staff, if they do spit on the staff. Those kids know nothing will happen to them...they have more rights than we do. I’ve been here for several years and if you touch them it’s your fault.”

Several younger staff members argued that those staff who had been in the facility the longest are still “in that old-school crap” mentality, which can negatively impact youth outcomes in the facility. One participant explained there are “staff that just run the boys down and they just don’t look for anything good in them.” This line staff noted the demographics of the youth have changed significantly and “it’s different now...these boys, you don’t touch them. If you get to restraining them, you gotta have a pretty legitimate reason to do it.”

While the punitive and rehabilitative approaches are often viewed as opposing one another, some staff explained that the strict discipline and punitive environment of the correctional setting was necessary for rehabilitation. For example, in discussing the move away from residential treatment facilities towards home placement monitoring within juvenile corrections, this staff member felt it would have minimal impact on reducing delinquent behavior for youth. Another staff member argued that home monitoring, such as ankle bracelet monitoring, would allow these youth to be home and “play some video games, get some sleep, have friends over and party a little...[then they] are back to their criminal thinking.” Removing youth from their home environment, as argued by many staff, offers delinquent youth a safe space for rehabilitation.

DISCUSSION

Existing literature stresses the importance of the relationship between staff and youth as critical for rehabilitation (Marsh & Evans, 2009). The current study suggests that creating a context for successful rehabilitative efforts may require a degree of trust between youth and staff as reflected in both staff and youth interviews. Despite the difficulties of devel-

oping trust with youth who have experienced abuse and distrust from adults in the past, many staff and youth described forming positive trusting relationships with one another. While youth may be initially reluctant to open up, some described the importance of finding things in common with a staff member, such as similar pasts and challenges with addiction. Once trust is developed, many staff and some youth noted the importance of maintaining a trusting relationship through consistency. Letting a youth down by lying to him or sharing confidential information threatens the vulnerable trust they have developed.

In an effort to build positive, supportive relationships with youth, some staff took youth “under their wing” resulting in perceptions of favoritism from other youth and staff. Despite the good intentions, the unfairness sensed by other youth likely undermines their potential to develop trust in the facility. Previous research exploring staff and prisoner populations has found that feelings of fairness appear to be “an important component of staff/prisoner relationships and of adjustment while incarcerated,” and can also impact rehabilitative programming (Cesaroni & Peterson-Badali, 2016, p. 534).

In contrast to the friendship model, which was discouraged by most staff, several staff identified as role-models or parental-type figures for the youth. Previous research has found these mentoring and role-modeling relationships to be promising for rehabilitative efforts. Through the interviews, staff noted the social and emotional support they provided by playing the role of the youth’s “mother” or “grandmother.” In moments when a parent failed to attend a scheduled meeting with their child, the staff member could fill in and provide a shoulder to cry on, or provide needed praise to build self-esteem in the classroom. However, the current study demonstrates the gendered dynamics involved in this role as well. Female staff described playing a parental role whereas male staff viewed themselves as “role-

models” and never referred to themselves as “fathers” or “grandfathers.” Interviews revealed that the female staff were primarily responsible for providing the emotional support to youth.

Through the interviews, several staff members noted other challenges experienced by female staff within the male facility. Some described the difficulty gaining the youth’s respect, being physically intimidated by larger youth, and the possibility for youth to sexualize and objectify younger female staff. The degradation and sexualization of female staff has also been noted in previous research on the performance of masculinity among incarcerated male juveniles (Magidson, 2020). The challenges female staff experience with some male youth add to the discussion on “our understanding of the risks and rewards of gender-matching youth and staff [which] is critical” (Marsh & Evans, 2009, p. 63). Despite these challenges, because female staff played the critical rehabilitative role of providing social and emotional support for youth in need, it is difficult to say whether these risks of “gender-matching” outweigh the rewards.

Some debate existed among staff regarding the value of discipline and punishment over supportive relationships with the youth. In particular, in this sample older male staff tended to favor strict punishment, while female staff were more likely to disagree with yelling at the youth. Some older staff longed for the “good old days” when youth had to show more respect for staff because there were stronger, physical repercussions for their actions. Many younger male staff agreed with female staff that the overly punitive and aggressive styles for handling youth were outdated. Supporting the findings from previous research, there are “tensions that are core to juvenile facilities: those between care and control” (Sankofa et al, 2018, p. 1773). However, the current study adds to our understanding of this tension by demonstrating the influence of gender and age on

perceptions of appropriate and effective strategies for corrections.

This current study yields important policy implications for researchers and juvenile justice practitioners. Because juveniles may be residing in correctional facilities for an extended period of time, the dynamics between adult staff within the facility is particularly influential. Therefore, training amongst correctional and educational staff working with juvenile populations should include more emphasis on how gender is experienced and navigated between adult staff within a facility. Furthermore, workshops and educational opportunities for correctional staff should be held regularly to ensure that all staff, regardless of their tenure within a facility, are provided with up-to-date resources on the populations of juveniles they work with.

The disparities that exist between staff regarding attitudes on gender, punishment, and friendship may be more significant than facilities may recognize. Providing opportunities for staff to learn, openly discuss, and reflect on issues related to punishment, friendship, gender, and delinquency can provide an important venue for staff to identify the different attitudes that persist within a facility. Because this study aligns with previous research that highlights the conflicting attitudes held by staff between “caring for” and “controlling” juvenile populations, practitioners should recognize the impact individual discretion of staff has on staff-youth relationships within a facility. As this study demonstrates, older male staff may be more resistant to rehabilitative approaches towards juveniles and therefore more sympathetic towards punitive practices within a correctional facility. Therefore, staff trainings should include broader conversations about the negative impact zero-tolerance policies and punitive-programming have on juvenile populations both inside and outside juvenile correctional facilities.

Future research should continue to explore the impact of age and gender on the types of relation-

ships between staff and youth, including the ability to develop trust and encourage rehabilitation. First, future studies should examine how identities amongst youth that are not heteronormative are repressed and understood by both youth and staff within correctional facilities. Secondly, future studies can focus on how the age, professional experiences, and personal backgrounds of adult staff shape feelings about their role within a juvenile correctional facility. Although a previous study from the 1990’s found that older staff were less punitive than their younger counterparts, the current study found the opposite trend wherein older, male staff were more likely to view physical, aggressive punishment as appropriate compared to younger staff (Bazemore, Dicker, & Al-Gadheed, 1994). This difference in findings could be due to the type of correctional facility, regional variation, or due to sample size. Therefore, additional studies should examine the role of age and attitudes of juvenile corrections staff for more insight into this topic.

CONCLUSION

This research contributes to a richer understanding of the dynamics between youth and staff within a private correctional facility. This study adds to the limited qualitative research conducted within juvenile facilities and elucidates the challenges and contradictions between youth and staff living and working within an all-male juvenile facility. Overall, most staff members held the general rehabilitative goal of helping the youth to improve their behavior and mentality. In addition to developing positive, supportive, and trusting relationships with the youth, staff described some of the rehabilitative efforts they felt were important to carry out on a regular basis. Most staff throughout the facility felt providing a safe, secure routine, informal education, and emotional support to the youth allowed them to develop trust, a sense of identity, work, and social skills necessary for re-routing their delinquent trajectories.

DECLARATION OF INTEREST

The authors report no conflict of interest.

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