Culture Works:

The Djamu Youth Justice Evaluation

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Acknowledgement of Country

We acknowledge the Traditional Custodians of the lands on which this research was conducted and on which Djamu Youth Justice programs operate, including the Dharug, Dharawal, Wiradjuri, Darkinjung, Gundungurra, and other Nations across New South Wales.

We pay respect to Elders past and present, to the young people whose stories shape this report, and to the cultural educators, artists and community leaders who carry the knowledge that guides Djamu.

We recognise that sovereignty was never ceded, that the justice system exists on unceded Aboriginal land, and that true justice for Aboriginal children includes cultural continuity, self-determination, and the right to live safely in community.

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Acknowledge of Artwork and Imagery

Dedication

For the young people, staff, and communities whose voices guide this work

List of Abbreviations

- ACCO – Aboriginal Community-Controlled Organisation
- AGNSW – Art Gallery of New South Wales
- AIHW – Australian Institute of Health and Welfare
- HREC – Human Research Ethics Committee
- IRM – Indigenous Research Methodologies
- NHMRC – National Health and Medical Research Council
- SEWB – Social and Emotional Wellbeing
- UTS – University of Technology Sydney
- YJNSW – Youth Justice New South Wales

Glossary of Key Terms

- **ACCO (Aboriginal Community-Controlled Organisation)**
  Aboriginal-led organisation governed by Aboriginal people, accountable to the communities it serves.
- **Clan/Totem Design** – Visual motifs connected to identity, ancestry, and Country.
- **Cultural safety**
  An environment that is spiritually, socially, emotionally, and physically safe for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, where there is no assault, challenge, or denial of their identity and experience.
- **Country**
  A holistic term referring to land, waters, skies, cultures, languages, stories, and all living beings, as understood within Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander worldviews.
- **Djamu**
  The Djamu Youth Justice Program—an Aboriginal-led art and culture program delivered by AGNSW in Youth Justice NSW centres, focused on cultural identity, creative practice, and relational healing.
- **Elders**
  Recognised Aboriginal knowledge holders and leaders who provide cultural guidance, governance, and authority.
- **Healing-Centred Engagement** – A strength-based approach focused on wellbeing, relationships, and culture.
- **Indigenous Research Methodologies (IRM)**
  Approaches to research that centre Indigenous worldviews, relational accountability, and community benefit, and recognise story, place, and kinship as central to knowledge production.
- **Social and Emotional Wellbeing (SEWB)**
  A holistic Indigenous concept of health that includes mental health alongside connection to Country, culture, spirituality, ancestry, family, and community.
- **Throughcare** – Continuity of support before, during, and after custody.
- **NVivo** – Qualitative analysis software used for coding and thematic analysis.
- **Youth Justice NSW (YJNSW)**
  The NSW Government agency responsible for supervising young people on community orders and in custody.

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Executive Summary

1. Background

Aboriginal young people remain profoundly over-represented in Youth Justice NSW. They comprise a minority of the youth population yet continue to represent a majority of those in detention. This disproportionate impact is widely documented as a consequence of colonisation, systemic racism, intergenerational trauma, and ongoing failures across education, policing, child protection, health and justice systems (Cunneen & Tauri, 2016; Beaufils et al, 2025; Beaufils, 2023; 2026). Within this context, cultural programs in custody are not optional "add-ons". They are essential mechanisms for identity restoration, emotional regulation, healing and connection to community. The Djamu Youth Justice Program is one of the very few initiatives explicitly grounded in First Nations Aboriginal art traditions, Elder and artist leadership, cultural safety and relational practice.

This evaluation assesses Djamu's impact across five Youth Justice NSW centres—Cobham, Reiby, Frank Baxter, Orana and Riverina—with additional insights and case material. It examines how Djamu influences cultural identity, emotional wellbeing, behaviour, staff–youth relationships and broader operational culture, and how it can inform system-level reform.

2. Evaluation Approach

The evaluation was First Nations-led with support from non-Indigenous researchers and guided by Indigenous Research Methodologies (Smith, 2012; Wilson, 2008), ethics and qualitative analysis.

Data sources included:

- Semi-structured interviews with 40 young people (approximately 10–20 per participating centre); five of these young people completed the program at the time of data collection, and of these only two were First Nations.
- Semi-structured interviews with 23 staff**,** including Youth Officers, psychologists, teachers, Aboriginal Education Officers (AEOs), Justice Health clinicians, program officers, and Art Gallery staff.
- Observational field notes from Djamu workshops, program spaces and unit environments.
- Representations of young people's artworks and cultural artefacts**,** with accompanying stories.
- Program and workshop materials, centre schedules and relevant policy documents.

Data were coded using NVivo and analysed through Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis. The evaluation addressed research questions across seven domains: cultural identity and connection, relationships with Elders and artists, vocational and educational pathways, staff capability, workforce dynamics, system culture and what young people needed before custody.

3. Key Findings at a Glance

Young people consistently described Djamu as qualitatively different from other programs in custody. They associated Djamu with pride, calm, safety and hope:

- **Cultural identity** – "Djamu made me feel proud of who I am again." — *Elliot*
- **Belonging** – "It's the only place here where I don't feel judged." — *Ashley*
- **Emotional regulation** – "I don't snap as much now." — *James*
- **Healing** – "It helped me with my grief." — *Bob*
- **Connection to Elders** – "Feels like family." — *Jace*
- **Future orientation** – "I want to keep doing art when I get out." — *Trey*

Staff, artists and Elders echoed these themes. They reported:

- Fewer unit incidents and a noticeable **calming effect** during and after sessions.
- Improved **staff–youth rapport** and more respectful communication.
- Increased **engagement** with education and other programs following Djamu.
- Significant **cultural learning for staff**, including greater confidence discussing culture and trauma.
- Stronger **trust, relational safety and cross-cultural unity** among young people, with Aboriginal, Māori, Pasifika and other culturally diverse boys working alongside one another.

4. Djamu's Unique Value

Djamu is not a conventional behavioural or offending-focused program. Its distinctive value lies in a set of interlocking features:

1. **A culturally legitimate space.** Djamu is explicitly Aboriginal-led and grounded in South-East cultural traditions, giving it credibility with young people who often feel misrepresented or pathologised.
2. **Art-based therapeutic practice.** Shield-making, carving, painting and design give young people non-verbal ways to process grief, anger, shame and pride.
3. **Elders and artists as cultural authorities.** Elders and cultural practitioners model alternative Aboriginal adult identities based on care, creativity and responsibility rather than control and punishment.
4. **Healing-centred engagement, not compliance.** Participation is voluntary and relationally driven; behaviour change is achieved through trust, dignity and story rather than sanctions.
5. **Cross-cultural participation.** While grounded in Aboriginal culture, Djamu welcomes Māori, Pasifika, Middle Eastern, African and other culturally diverse young people, building solidarity and a sense of shared struggle.
6. **Vocational and creative pathways.** The program introduces practical artistic skills and exposes young people to real creative and cultural careers.
7. **Throughcare relevance.** Young people consistently expressed a desire to continue art and cultural engagement after release, signalling strong potential for community-based Djamu pathways.

These elements align with research on the factors that promote Indigenous healing justice and trauma recovery, where identity transformation, cultural connection and pro-social relationships are central drivers of change (Dudgeon, P. et al 2021).

5. Outcomes associated with Djamu

- **Identity formation.**
  Youth described rediscovering cultural pride through shield painting, carving and learning local motifs and stories. Many contrasted this with earlier experiences of shame and internalised racism.
- **Behavioural change.**
  Staff across centres consistently referred to Djamu as "the calmest space in the centre." They linked program days to fewer unit incidents, smoother transitions and improved group dynamics.
- **Emotional healing.**
  Young people described using Djamu to process grief, family loss, anger and shame in ways they had struggled to articulate in other settings. The creative process was experienced as safer than formal counselling.
- **Cross-cultural *"brotherhood".***
  Participants described Djamu as "one of the only places where everyone gets along." The space disrupted racialised unit divisions and fostered mutual respect and solidarity.
- **Educational engagement.**
  Teachers reported increased attendance, concentration and confidence among Djamu participants. Some young people re-engaged with literacy, numeracy and creative writing through their artwork.
- **Staff capability development.**
  Staff learned cultural protocols, art knowledge and new relational strategies. Many reported that Djamu shifted their understanding of young people's behaviour and reinforced trauma-aware, relational responses.
- **System-level impact.**
  Djamu has the potential to demonstrate a practical model for shifting operational culture towards trauma-informed, relational and culturally grounded practice, but offering a culturally safe counterpoint to purely risk- and compliance-driven approaches.

6. Limitations

The evaluation was conducted within the constraints of custodial environments. Key limitations included:

- Inconsistent access to young people due to **lockdowns and operational disruptions**.
- **Staff turnover** and rostering challenges affecting program continuity and evaluation interviews.
- Limited and sometimes insecure **infrastructure for art materials and storage**.
- Lack of **dedicated cultural spaces** in some centres, requiring Djamu to operate in multipurpose rooms or classrooms.
- Gaps in **throughcare and post-release support**, limiting the ability to track longer-term outcomes or maintain cultural relationships after release.
- Only a small number of young people had completed Djamu. There is a need for more research to more fully understand the potential of cultural art-based programs to improve outcomes for children and young people in custody.

Despite these constraints, strong convergence of youth, staff, artist and Elder accounts across multiple centres provides confidence in the robustness of the findings.

7. Recommendations

A. Expand Djamu statewide.
Recognise Djamu as an integral program, not a pilot, and support consistent delivery across all Youth Justice centres, with the key Elders, knowledge holders and Community Members consultation and engagement. Integrate baseline funding into annual budgets for long-term sustainability.

B. Build a cultural workforce.
Invest in Elders, Aboriginal artists and cultural practitioners as a dedicated workforce, with secure contracts, appropriate remuneration, supervision and wellbeing supports.

C. Create dedicated cultural spaces.
Establish purpose-designed cultural rooms and art studios (for example, shield-texture rooms, outdoor art areas and culturally safe meeting spaces) in each centre. Rethinking the architecture of the centres.

D. Strengthen throughcare pathways.
Develop clear post-release pathways into community-based art and cultural programs, including ACCO partnerships, cultural mentors, community exhibitions, housing options and accredited training. Extend post-release peer-mentoring, extending leadership through-care, backed by evidence.

E. Workforce development.
Embed Djamu principles into staff learning through mandatory cultural capability training, co-delivery models, sustained and structured mentoring between Elders, artists and centre staff. This is to be for all youth justice and gallery staffing.

F. Program expansion.
Explore additions such as on-Country camps, leadership and peer-mentor pathways

for alumni, and accredited art, design and digital media training. This is to be considered additionally post-release.

G. Address structural barriers.
Reduce punitive regimes that undermine cultural work, invest in cultural programming as a protective factor, centre movement/shutdowns and embed healing-centred frameworks in policy, risk assessment and case management.

H. Strengthen masculinities through culture. Embed centre practice and protect continuity, resource mentors and peer leadership, and integrate a masculinities-aware healing lens into case planning, behaviour support, and transitions.

8. Conclusion

The evaluation demonstrates that cultural arts-based programs like Djamu can work to support healing, identity strengthening, relational transformation and behavioural change in ways that conventional programs struggle to achieve. Djamu demonstrates how culture, art and First Nations leadership have the potential to be transformative not only for individual young people but also the everyday culture of Youth Justice centres. Djamu should be embedded, expanded and recognised as a core pillar of cultural justice in New South Wales. Culture heals. Culture protects. Culture transforms.

PART I — INTRODUCTION

Youth justice systems in Australia continue to reflect enduring patterns of colonial harm, structural inequality, and punitive governance, disproportionately affecting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people. In New South Wales (NSW), these structural dynamics manifest starkly: Aboriginal young people comprise a small proportion of the youth population yet make up the majority of those in detention. Far from being a contemporary anomaly, this pattern reflects a long history of forced child removal, criminalisation of cultural practices, and institutional responses that prioritise surveillance over healing (Cunneen & Tauri, 2016).

The Djamu Youth Justice Program—delivered through a partnership between the Art Gallery of New South Wales (AGNSW) and Youth Justice NSW (YJNSW)—emerged as a direct response to these historical conditions. Djamu represents a culturally grounded, art-based, trauma-informed and relationally centred program designed specifically for Aboriginal young people in detention. It brings Indigenous artists, cultural practitioners, and Elders into the centres to work with young people through creative practice, cultural storytelling, and identity-strengthening activities rooted in South-East Aboriginal traditions. As this evaluation demonstrates, Djamu is not simply an "arts program" but a cultural, emotional, and relational intervention. Figure 1 below provides a conceptual visualisation of how Djamu positions culture as the central driver of identity, healing, and behaviour change.

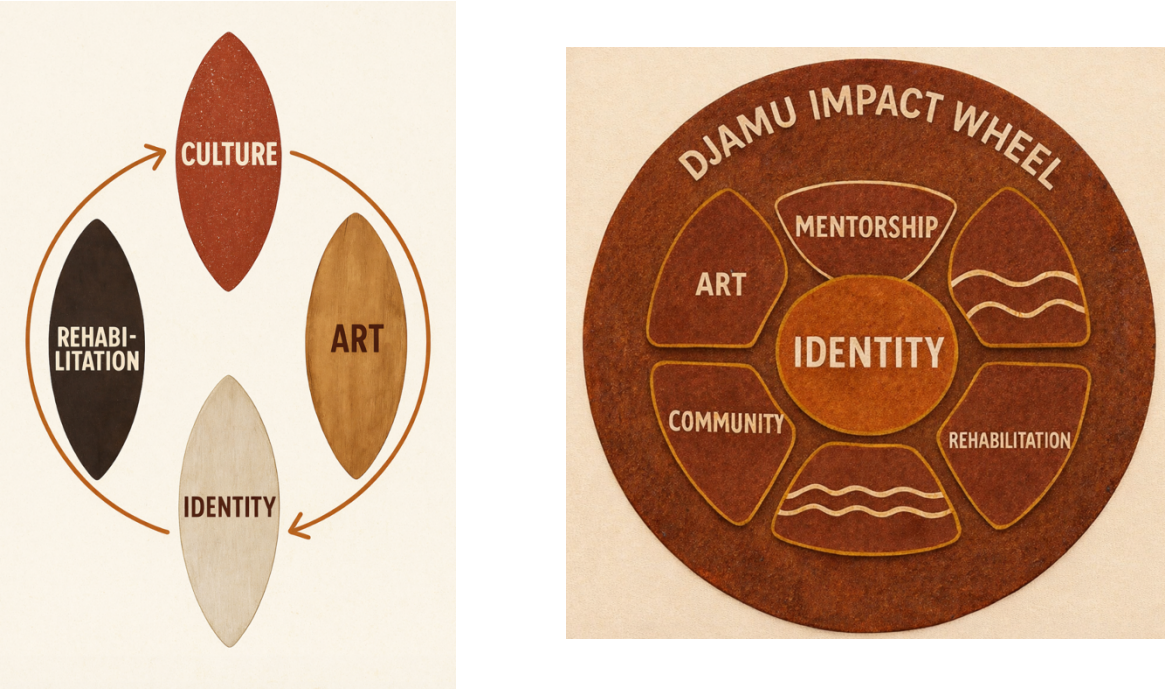

Image 1. Key Components and 2. Djamu Impact Wheel
(A circular shield-texture diagram illustrating Culture → Identity → Trust → Healing → Behaviour Change → Future Pathways.)

1.1 Purpose of This Evaluation

The purpose of this evaluation was to explore the factors that influenced the implementation of Djamu, along with young people, staff, artist and Elder perspectives on the program and its impact across four NSW Youth Justice Centres: Cobham, Reiby, Frank Baxter, and Riverina. Guided by Indigenous Research Methodologies (Smith, 2012; Wilson, 2008), the evaluation sought to understand:

1. How Djamu supports cultural identity and belonging.
2. How the program strengthens relationships with artists, Elders, and the broader Aboriginal community.
3. The impact of the program influences on staff practice, cultural capability, and broader operational culture.
4. What young people identify as missing in their lives before custody—and whether Djamu addresses these gaps.

This evaluation also aims to inform policy, program design, workforce development, and long-term planning within Youth Justice NSW.

1.2 Over-Representation of First Nations Young People in NSW

The over-representation of First Nations young people in detention remains one of the most urgent social justice issues in Australia. Although Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people make up approximately 3.3% of the national population, they represent more than half of young people in custody in NSW (AIHW, 2023). Detention rates for Aboriginal children are 28 times higher than those of non-Indigenous children, and diversion rates remain significantly lower (AIHW, 2025a). The young people interviewed for this evaluation frequently described early life experiences shaped by:

- school exclusion
- child protection involvement
- homelessness or unstable care
- systemic racism
- early exposure to violence
- community disconnection
- intergenerational trauma

As one young man stated: “I been locked up since I was 10, in and out. No one told me who I was back then.” — *“Billy-Bob”* These structural determinants shape both pathways into custody and possibilities for reintegration. Without culturally grounded support systems, many young people find themselves cycling through the justice system.

Djamu stands out because it aims to intervene at the level of identity formation and cultural connection—factors consistently linked to reduced recidivism and increased wellbeing (Chandler & Lalonde, 1998; Dudgeon, P. et al 2021)

1.3 Why Culture Matters in Youth Justice

Cultural identity has long been recognised as essential to the social, emotional, and psychological wellbeing of Aboriginal young people (Dudgeon et al., 2014). Strong cultural identity is associated with:

- reduced suicide risk
- increased resilience
- improved emotional regulation
- fewer behavioural incidents
- greater future orientation
- improved learning outcomes
- stronger community ties

For young people in detention, cultural disconnection is often profound. Many participants described knowing they were Aboriginal but lacking knowledge of:

- their clan or mob
- local language
- kinship
- cultural practices
- their family story
- Elders or community mentors

As one youth explained: "I knew I was Koori, but I didn't know what that meant until Djamu." — *"Reece"* The Djamu program directly addresses this gap by providing culturally legitimate spaces where young people can explore identity, build confidence, and be guided by cultural knowledge holders.

1.4 Program ecology in custody: My Journey, My Life and other completed programs

Youth Justice NSW centres deliver a range of offence-focused and therapeutic programs intended to support rehabilitation, reduce re-offending and address criminogenic needs. Within this ecology, My Journey, My Life (MJML) is a culturally specific intervention designed primarily for young Aboriginal men, with a focus on preventing and reducing relationship violence by shifting harmful power dynamics and strengthening respectful relational understanding. A related program, My Journey, My Life (Yinnar), is designed for young Aboriginal women. These programs are typically structured, module-based and aligned to case planning and offence-focused intervention pathways.

Interview data for this evaluation indicates that young people and staff differentiate between these structured offence-focused programs and cultural programs such as Djamu. Where offence-focused interventions are experienced as cognitively and emotionally demanding—often requiring disclosure, reflection and sustained attention—Djamu was consistently described as a culturally safe space that stabilises mood, reduces hyperarousal and builds trust through artmaking, yarning and cultural mentoring. This supports the evaluation's organising mechanism—Culture → Identity → Rehabilitation—in which cultural grounding provides the conditions for strengthening identity and emotional regulation, which in turn may enable fuller engagement with education, counselling and offence-focused interventions.

In this way, Djamu does not sit in competition with programs such as MJML. Rather, it appears to function as a complementary cultural foundation that can enhance "program readiness"—supporting young people to feel safe, respected and able to participate more meaningfully in other interventions. This is particularly relevant given the broader context of entrenched Aboriginal over-representation in custody, high rates of trauma exposure, and the disruptions caused by staff turnover, lockdowns and short custodial stays. Findings suggest that where cultural programs are stable and led by Aboriginal cultural authorities, they can strengthen relational climates across units and provide a shared, non-punitive platform through which staff and young people can communicate about regulation, identity and future orientation. Future program design should therefore treat cultural programming as core infrastructure—embedded alongside offence-focused interventions—rather than as an "add-on", and should support clearer pathways between in-custody cultural engagement and post-release cultural continuity.

1.5 Creativity, Storywork and Healing

Art-based programs have been identified internationally as powerful tools for trauma processing, emotional expression, and identity-building, particularly in custodial settings (Hughes, 2005; Cox & Gelsthorpe, 2008). For Aboriginal young people, art is not merely therapeutic—it is cultural. Djamu uses a methodology deeply rooted in:

- South-East Aboriginal visual traditions (shield-making, carving, ochre use)
- storywork
- yarning as pedagogy
- collective creativity
- relational accountability
- Elder guidance

These cultural methods allow young people to express grief, anger, pride, and hope in culturally appropriate ways. As one participant shared during a shield-painting session: "When I paint, it's like I'm telling someone what happened without talking." — *"John"* Art becomes a bridge to emotional literacy (Gee et al. 2014; Schroeder, M. et al. 2022; Riley, et al. 2025), enabling therapeutic expression in ways conventional programs rarely achieve.

1.6 The Role of Elders, Artists, and Cultural Mentors

Djamu brings Elders and Aboriginal artists into custodial environments—spaces often dominated by authority, discipline, and surveillance. Their presence fundamentally changes the emotional tone and relational dynamics. Staff described this transformation repeatedly: "When the Djamu mob walk in, the boys change. They stand taller." — *Nathan (Youth Officer)*. The presence of cultural authority:

- increases trust
- improves behaviour
- reduces incidents
- enhances engagement
- provides culturally safe boundaries
- models respect and relational responsibility

Young people articulated deep respect for Djamu artists, often describing them as father figures, uncles, aunties, or role models.

1.6 Overview of This Report

This report is structured in ten parts. **Part I** provides the introduction and situates the Djamu Youth Justice Program within the broader context of Youth Justice NSW. **Part II** presents a review of relevant national and international literature. **Part III** outlines the Djamu program, including its history, objectives and delivery model. **Part IV** describes the evaluation framework and methodology. **Part V** presents the findings organised by the seven research questions (RQ1–RQ7). **Part VI** offers an integrated thematic analysis across all data sources. **Part VII** details youth and staff case studies that illustrate the findings in depth. **Part VIII** discusses the implications of the evaluation for practice, policy and future program development. **Part IX** sets out system-level recommendations. **Part X** provides the overall conclusion. The **Appendices** contain supporting materials, including interview schedules, coding structures, additional tables, extended quotations and figures. Together, these sections offer a comprehensive, evidence-based understanding of how Djamu influences young people, staff, and youth justice environments.

PART II — LITERATURE REVIEW AND PROGRAM OVERVIEW

2.1 Australian Literature on Culture, Youth Justice, and Art-Based Interventions

The Australian literature on youth justice has consistently demonstrated that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people experience vastly disproportionate levels of police contact, court appearances and detention when compared to non-Indigenous youth. Scholars attribute this over-representation not to individual deficits but to entrenched structural, historical and socio-political conditions (Beaufils, 2026; Beaufils et al., 2025; Cunneen, 2001). Within this body of research, a complementary field has increasingly emphasised the protective value of cultural identity, community connection and healing practices for Aboriginal young people (Dudgeon et al., 2014; Gee et al., 2014). In parallel, growing evidence base surrounds the effectiveness of art-based interventions, particularly when grounded in culturally legitimate practices (Riley, T. 2024; Fono, et al. 2025), however more is needed within the custodial setting. Specifics of the literature used has largely, been completed by non-indigenous peoples with limited First Nations engagement, identifying the need for appropriate research. This section situates the Djamu Youth Justice Program within this scholarship and highlights the theoretical foundations that support culture-based, art-driven, trauma-informed youth justice programming in Australia.

2.2 Aboriginal Over-Representation and Structural Determinants

Australian research has long shown that Aboriginal young people are far more likely to experience school exclusion, child protection involvement, police surveillance and socio-economic disadvantage, all of which contribute to early and repeated justice system contact (Cunneen & Tauri, 2016; Weatherburn, 2014). These structural determinants—not individual failings—form the pathways into detention. Studies have consistently documented that Aboriginal children are suspended more frequently and for longer durations, placing them at heightened risk of eventual incarceration (Lamb et al., 2015). Similarly, high rates of child removal and the intergenerational impacts of trauma and dispossession continue to shape the social contexts of many Aboriginal families (SNAICC, 2020; Beaufils, 2023).

The literature consistently argues that meaningful interventions must therefore address cultural disconnection, social exclusion and systemic racism, rather than reducing young people's behaviours to isolated incidents or deficits. Institutions, including youth justice responses, must recognise the impact of colonisation, identity disruption and cultural marginalisation on offending trajectories (Beaufils, 2026). These insights strongly align with the design of Djamu, which responds to these deeper determinants by centring cultural identity, belonging and relational healing.

2.3. Youth Custody, Implications and Interventions

2.3.1. Cultural Identity, Wellbeing and Healing

Australian research on Aboriginal wellbeing emphasises the western and holistic model known as Social and Emotional Wellbeing (SEWB), which has tried to be indigenised by positioning mental health within a broader framework of cultural identity, spirituality,

Country, ancestry, kinship and community (Gee et al., 2014). This model stands in contrast to Western psychological frameworks that pay limited attention to the importance of spirituality and neglect the importance of kinship and connection to the land and ancestors in their conceptualisation (Beaufils, 2023). Scholars such as Haswell et al. (2013) and Dudgeon et al. (2014) argue that strong cultural identity is associated with reduced suicidality, increased resilience, stronger emotional regulation and more stable social relationships among Aboriginal young people. The literature therefore positions cultural strengthening as a cornerstone of Aboriginal youth wellbeing (Gupta, et al. 2020). Djamu aligns closely with this conceptualisation by embedding cultural teachings, Aboriginal art traditions and Elder-led practice at the centre of its methodology.

The literature on Aboriginal youth detention emphasises high rates of unresolved trauma, cumulative grief and systemic dislocation (Atkinson, 2002; Beaufils, 2026; Dudgeon et al., 2014). Many Aboriginal young people have experienced multiple bereavements, exposure to violence, child removal, unstable housing and community trauma. Traumatised young people entering custodial environments often display hyperarousal, emotional dysregulation and mistrust of authority figures (Desai, 2019; Malvaso et al., 2022). Trauma-informed practice literature stresses the need for safety, predictability, relational stability and grounding activities (Isobel et al., 2021). Art and cultural practices provide pathways for somatic regulation and emotional processing within these frameworks (Barnett et al 2024; Diéguez et al. 2024).

2.3.2. Cultural Programs in Custody and Art-Based Interventions, Creative Practice in Youth Justice

Despite the limited number of formal evaluations, Australian literature increasingly recognises the value of cultural programs delivered within custodial settings. Blagg et al. (2018) argue that cultural interventions—such as Elder visitation programs, on-Country activities and Aboriginal-led mentoring—operate as healing mechanisms that respond to both immediate emotional needs and long-term intergenerational trauma. Similar findings have emerged from evaluations of cultural camps in Western Australia and Elders' programs in the Northern Territory, where participation has been associated with reductions in violent incidents, increased cooperation with staff and improved behavioural outcomes (Ogloff et al., 2013).

Australian and international research confirms that art-based interventions in detention support emotional expression, trauma processing, cognitive engagement and identity development (Hughes, 2005; Cox & Gelsthorpe, 2008; Mansfield et al. 2024). Creative programs provide non-verbal pathways to articulate grief, anger, fear and hope—emotions that many young people struggle to express verbally due to trauma histories or hypervigilance (van der Kolk, 2014). Within Aboriginal contexts, art is also a cultural medium, carrying ancestral knowledge, kinship stories and regional motifs. Kleinert (2012) notes that Aboriginal artmaking can reconnect young people with intergenerational cultural practices, even if they were not raised within cultural traditions.

Djamu's integration of traditional shield motifs, ochre painting and cultural storytelling therefore resonates with Australian evidence that art-based programs can be important vehicles for healing and rehabilitation in custody.

2.3.5. Gender, masculinities and carceral space

First Nations masculinities in settler-colonial contexts cannot be understood as individual identity traits or "risk factors" detached from place. Rather, masculinities are shaped—and often distorted—through the spatial and bureaucratic infrastructures of colonisation: child protection, policing, courts, prisons, youth detention, and contracted service systems. These institutions do not simply *respond* to family life; they actively govern it by sorting, surveilling, and re-coding kinship relations. In this terrain, categories such as the "absent father" are not only descriptive labels but administrative outcomes produced through removal, imprisonment, supervised contact regimes, housing instability, and documentation requirements that make fathering possible or impossible. Masculinity and fatherhood therefore operate as institutional statuses that can be granted, denied, or made conditional on compliance, rather than as relational obligations held within kinship ecologies.

This insight aligns with Beaufils' critique of translation failures between Indigenous kinship orders and child protection policy. Beaufils (2023) shows that "kinship" is not merely a placement type but a bloodline-based relational order—an ecology of belonging, responsibility, recognition, and care—often flattened by bureaucratic definitions of "kinship care." When systems treat kinship as an administrable category rather than an Indigenous social order, they misrecognise obligations that are distributed across extended family networks. Beaufils (2026) extends this analysis through the "sovereign childhoods" frame, positioning out-of-home care as a colonial governance system with structural drivers and cultural rights impacts, and arguing that transformation must be grounded in cultural rights and sovereign relational orders rather than deficit-based remediation. Together, these works locate the production of family life (and the masculinities within it) inside broader colonial infrastructures that regulate legitimacy, caregiving, and belonging.

Within criminology and masculinity studies, Lockwood and Williamson (2022) theorise Indigenous masculinities as produced within a dispersed "carceral archipelago" of settler institutions. Their analysis highlights how institutional networks criminalise Indigenous men through settler perceptions and "invader masculinities," producing dominant narratives of danger, dysfunction, and moral failure that obscure the structural and spatial conditions shaping men's lives. This perspective pushes against simplified accounts of "violent masculinity" by tracing how state systems produce racialised masculine subjectivities—through policing encounters, sentencing patterns, custody cycles, and the substitution of institutional authority for community recognition. In this view, misrecognition is not incidental; it is systemic, and it travels through the spatial logics of institutional power. Bringing these strands together, an emerging conceptual direction is to re-specify the unit of analysis away from the father–child dyad and toward the kinship ecology, and to re-specify the central construct away from "involvement" toward obligation and recognition-in-place.

2.3.6. Staff Capability, Cultural Safety and Organisational Culture

Australian scholarship highlights the importance of staff practice, cultural capability and organisational culture in shaping the experiences of Aboriginal young people (APSC, 2015). Environments that lack cultural safety exacerbate mistrust and behavioural issues, whereas staff trained in trauma-informed, culturally grounded approaches build stronger relationships and improved program engagement. Cultural capability development among staff increases safety, reduces incidents and enhances the rehabilitative environment. Staff interviewed for

this evaluation reflected these findings. Several reported learning cultural knowledge from Djamu practitioners and adjusting their own approaches accordingly These testimonies align with literature indicating that

2.3.7. Summary

The Australian literature provides robust evidence that youth justice interventions must be culturally grounded, trauma-informed and relationally centred to support meaningful change for Aboriginal young people, however there is a significant need for this to be completed in by or with first Nations communities. Studies emphasise that cultural identity, creative expression and community connection are protective factors associated with improved wellbeing and reduced offending (Diéguez et al. 2024).The Djamu Youth Justice Program aligns closely with these findings, integrating cultural knowledge, art-based healing and Elder-led relational practice into custodial environments in ways that address the structural, historical and emotional determinants of youth justice involvement.

2.4. International Literature on Culture, Art, Healing and Youth Justice

2.4.1. Aotearoa New Zealand: Māori Cultural Justice as a Foundational Model

Aotearoa New Zealand offers one of the most advanced and well-documented Indigenous cultural justice systems globally. Māori criminologists emphasise that effective justice responses for Māori youth must be grounded in tikanga—the body of laws, ethics and protocols that govern relationships, land, community obligations and spiritual responsibilities (Jackson, 1988). Tikanga-based youth justice models centre whānau (family), mana (dignity and integrity), wairuatanga (spirituality), whakapapa (ancestral relations) and rangatiratanga (self-determination). These concepts shape the structure and conduct of programs such as Te Pae Oranga (Iwi Community Panels) and Te Kooti Rangatahi (Māori Youth Court).

Te Kooti Rangatahi is particularly relevant for comparison with Djamu. Hearings take place on marae, overseen by Elders (kaumātua), where the young person participates in cultural rituals, receives guidance, engages in serious discussion about harm, and reconnects with community obligations (Kingi, et al. 2018). Studies show that participation in Rangatahi Courts generates higher levels of engagement, improved compliance with court orders, stronger relationships with family and Elders, and a heightened sense of belonging and cultural pride (Jackson, 1988). These outcomes arise not from punitive measures but from the restoration of cultural identity and the presence of Elders, cultural mentors and wider kin networks.

2.4.2. Canada: First Nations, Inuit and Métis Healing Justice Models

Canada has developed extensive research on Indigenous healing justice, with Indigenous Healing Lodges forming the core of culturally grounded correctional responses. Healing Lodges operate on principles of ceremony, Elders' leadership, land-based learning, family involvement and the continuity of Indigenous law and spiritual practices (Office of the Correctional Investigator, 2013). These are not symbolic additions to the custodial environment but central mechanisms through which healing, identity reconstruction and behavioural change occur.

For Indigenous youth in particular, cultural immersion significantly improves emotional regulation, optimism, cultural continuity and engagement in programs (Black et al, 2024; Snowshoe et al., 2014; 2017). Snowshoe's study of First Nations youth highlights that cultural identity and healing practices provide a protective buffer against trauma and support a sense of purpose. One participant stated: *"Culture is what kept me alive"* (Snowshoe et al., 2014, p. 240). Arts-based healing also plays a significant role in Canadian Indigenous justice work. Inuit and Cree youth programs have emphasised carving, beading, drum-making and storytelling as means of emotional release, intergenerational knowledge transfer and community reconnection (France, 2020). The physicality of carving or crafting mirrors Djamu's shield-making workshops, where the act of shaping a cultural object supports emotional grounding.

2.4.3. United States: African American, Native American and Latino Youth Justice Literature

The United States provides extensive empirical research on racially minoritised youth in detention, particularly African American, Native American and Latino youth. Studies consistently demonstrate that these groups experience heightened exposure to policing, school exclusion, community violence and economic deprivation, all of which correlate with increased justice system involvement (Goff et al., 2014; Abrams & Terry, 2017).

For many African American and Native American youth, trauma—both personal and intergenerational—shapes behavioural patterns. Research shows that conventional custodial environments often exacerbate trauma through isolation, a lack of cultural support, and punitive responses to emotional dysregulation (Wilson, 2007; Ford, et al. 2015). As a result, arts programs have become a central feature of rehabilitative work in US youth detention (CSATUS, 2014).

Pearson (2008) and Murphy et al., (2013) document significant improvements in emotional regulation, self-esteem, communication skills and behavioural incidents among incarcerated youth who engage in structured art programs. These interventions allow young people to express anger, grief and identity struggles in non-destructive ways (Richards, K et al. 2011). The Art for Justice program, for example, demonstrated substantial reductions in behavioural incidents among African American youth when art therapy became a regular part of their custodial routine (Vice, 2012). The literature also shows that racialised youth use art as a mode of resistance to oppressive narratives. Creative expression enables them to articulate identities that are otherwise suppressed within institutional environments (Habib, S. 2025; Maxwell et al. 2020; Weiser, S. 2018)

2.4.4. Pacific Region: Pasifika and Melanesian Approaches to Relational Justice

Across Pacific nations, youth justice responses emphasise collective identity, genealogy, spiritual relationships and the interconnectedness of individuals within extended kin networks (Ravulo, et al. 2019). Concepts such as vā, the relational space between people, and talanoa, a form of deep, respectful dialogue, underpin Pasifika approaches to resolving harm and supporting young people (Suaalii-Sauni & Fulu, 2014; Beaufils et al, Forthcoming). These approaches emphasise communal responsibility, Elders' authority and the restoration of harmony rather than individual blame. Pasifika programs frequently incorporate carving, weaving, dance, drumming and storytelling to promote cultural continuity and emotional processing. These creative modalities facilitate not only expression but also belonging. This

is particularly relevant for Djamu, given that many participants identified as Pasifika, African, Aboriginal or mixed heritage.

2.4.5. Healing-Centred Engagement and Cross-Cultural Synthesis

Ginwright's (2018) model of healing-centred engagement emphasises collective wellbeing, cultural identity, community empowerment and the development of hope. It situates young people's distress within the broader conditions of inequality and structural harm. According to Ginwright, healing requires spaces where young people can imagine alternative futures, build creative expression, experience joy and participate in culturally grounded relationships. Djamu aligns closely with these principles.

Across all jurisdictions surveyed—Aotearoa, Canada, the US, Pacific nations and Europe—the literature converges on several central findings. First, cultural identity functions as a protective factor against harm, disconnection and offending. Second, arts-based programs provide non-verbal pathways for emotional expression, trauma healing and identity formation. Third, community authority—whether from Elders, artists, mentors or cultural leaders—plays a transformative role in behaviour and engagement. Fourth, collectivist and relational approaches outperform individually oriented, punitive systems. Fifth, youth justice transformation requires staff who are willing to shift from control-based to relational approaches.

3. The Djamu Youth Justice Program Overview

3.1 Introduction

Djamu is the umbrella name for the Art Gallery of NSW's First Nations programming. The word 'Djamu' is from the Sydney Aboriginal language meaning 'here I am' or 'here I come'. It encompasses a suite of initiatives designed for First Nations audiences and is led and delivered by the Gallery's First Nations team, including Djamu Metropolitan, Djamu Regional and Djamu Youth Justice. Within this portfolio, Djamu Youth Justice focuses on working with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people who are at risk of, or who have had, contact with the legal system. The program delivers artist-led workshops and creative projects across both custodial settings (youth justice centres) and community-based contexts, including early intervention programs delivered in community and in schools.

The Djamu Youth Justice Program was developed through a partnership between the Art Gallery of New South Wales (AGNSW) and Youth Justice NSW (YJNSW) and evaluated by the Jumbunna Institute for Indigenous Education and Research. The program offers Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people the opportunity to engage with cultural knowledge, artmaking, mentorship, and identity-building within a custodial setting.

The program's design is informed by Aboriginal relational epistemologies, contemporary art education, community cultural development principles, and trauma-informed practice. Its methodology is grounded in the understanding that culture, creativity, relational safety, and identity transformation form the foundation of meaningful rehabilitation. The following section outlines the origins, structure, delivery model, cultural foundations and pedagogical intentions of the Djamu Youth Justice Program.

3.2 Program History

Djamu emerged from AGNSW's longstanding commitment to Aboriginal art education and community cultural development. Initially conceived through outreach programs and school engagement initiatives, Djamu was extended to youth justice environments in response to the growing need for culturally grounded, identity-affirming programming for Aboriginal young people in detention. The first iterations of Djamu were delivered at Reiby and Cobham Youth Justice Centres, with the intention of expanding the program to Frank Baxter, Riverina, and Orana. Over time, Djamu evolved from short-term workshops into a 10-week structured learning sequence integrating cultural knowledge, art technique development, critical thinking, storytelling and creative expression.

The program's growth was supported by AGNSW's partnership with Elders, Aboriginal artists, curators, cultural educators and community mentors. As one long-term Djamu practitioner explained during interviews: *"The intention was always to bring culture to the boys, not to bring a class. Culture is the class"* (Artist Mentor). This evolution reflects broader thought suggesting that sustained, relational and culturally embedded practice is more effective than episodic or activity-based interventions.

3.3 Cultural Foundations and Philosophical Approach

The guiding philosophy of Djamu is that cultural identity is a source of strength, belonging, emotional stability and future orientation for Aboriginal young people. The program explicitly integrates:

- Aboriginal cultural knowledge
- Regional art traditions
- Storywork and narrative expression
- Elders' authority
- Cultural mentorship
- Trauma-informed, healing-centred practice

These elements form a single, interconnected cultural framework. Djamu's pedagogical structure is grounded in relational teaching, with facilitators emphasising yarning, cultural safety and deep listening. Young people are encouraged to explore personal narratives, family histories, connection to Country, and cultural belonging through visual design and symbolic representation. These elements reflect the literature on Indigenous SEWB models (Gee et al., 2014, and reinforce the relational foundations of the program.

3.4 Program Activities and Learning Sequence

Djamu's delivery model follows a 10-week structured curriculum, with sessions facilitated by Aboriginal artists, cultural educators and AGNSW staff. Each session includes:

> **Cultural grounding-** The session begins with a yarning circle, Elder or cultural practitioner guidance, or cultural discussion connecting young people to regional stories, motifs or practices.
> **Art technique development-** The facilitator introduces specific methods such as linework, layering, colour symbolism, shield design, ochre-inspired palette use, or the interpretation of cultural patterns.
> **Creative expression-** Young people create their own artworks—often shields, emblems or narrative compositions—reflecting their identities, families, experiences or aspirations.
> **Reflection and sharing-** Participants speak about their artworks, emotions and meanings, practicing storytelling, self-description and relational communication.

The pacing of activities is intentionally calm and sensory, supporting emotional regulation. Facilitators emphasise patience, presence, and process rather than outcome. This structure aligns with art therapy literature, which stresses the value of routine, predictability and sensory grounding for trauma-affected young people (Malchiodi, 2012).

3.6 The Shield Motif

A defining feature of Djamu is its use of the shield as a central artistic and cultural motif. The shield symbol operates simultaneously as:

- a cultural object
- a metaphor for identity
- a protective emblem

- a storytelling surface
- a pathway to ancestral knowledge

Young people described the shield as representing “family,” “strength,” “protection,” and “my story.” Several youths incorporated totems, family names, clan motifs and colour symbolism into their shields. The shield motif is illustrated in Image 1 and 2, which presents examples of youth-completed artworks featuring traditional carving patterns, ochre-inspired colour palettes and personal symbolism.

The shield’s significance aligns with Indigenous cultural theory that conceptualises objects of cultural meaning as carriers of identity, narrative and lineage (Kleinert, 2012). Shields in particular carry regional significance in southeast Aboriginal art traditions, making them both culturally legitimate and emotionally resonant.

3.7 Summary

In summary, the Djamu Youth Justice Program is a culturally grounded, relational and creative intervention that leverages Aboriginal art practices to support emotional regulation, identity building and trauma healing among young people in custody. Its design aligns closely with theoretical, cultural and international evidence supporting Indigenous-led, art-based youth justice interventions (Motto-Ochoa, et al. 2024). The program’s rich cultural foundations, skilled Aboriginal facilitators and symbolic artmaking methodology position it as a unique and impactful model of practice within the NSW youth justice system.

PART III — METHODOLOGY AND EVALUATION FRAMEWORK

4.1 Introduction

The evaluation of the Djamu Youth Justice Program was designed to explore the factors that impacted the implementation and delivery of the program across five Youth Justice NSW (YJNSW) centres. As data collection evolved, it became apparent that it was also important to explore the cultural, emotional, relational, behavioural, and systemic impacts of the program. Because Djamu is grounded in Aboriginal artmaking, cultural identity, connection to Country, and relational practice, the evaluation required a methodology that could meaningfully reflect the lived experiences of Aboriginal young people, Elders, cultural practitioners, staff, and the broader custodial environment.

A qualitative, First Nations-led, multi-centre evaluation design was adopted. This design prioritised depth, nuance, and context, which are essential for understanding cultural identity formation, the effects of trauma, relational safety, and the program’s potential influence on behaviour and wellbeing. The approach aligns with scholarship emphasising that Indigenous programs should be evaluated using culturally grounded frameworks that respect story, relationality, place, and voice (Dudgeon & Walker, 2021; Martin, 2008; Wilson, 2008).

The evaluation was conducted with input from the Art Gallery of New South Wales (AGNSW), Youth Justice NSW staff, and researchers from the Jumbunna Institute for Indigenous Education and Research. This group ensured that the evaluation remained culturally safe, protected the stories of participants, and adhered to community expectations about how data should be gathered, interpreted, and returned.

4.2 Indigenous Research Methodologies

The evaluation was explicitly guided by Indigenous Research Methodologies (IRM). IRM is founded on the understanding that knowledge is relational, contextual, and deeply tied to Country, cultural identity, and kinship structures, and that research must be accountable to these relationships (Martin, 2008; Wilson, 2008). Rather than treating participants as subjects of research, IRM positions them as knowledge-holders whose experiences and interpretations are central to understanding the meaning and impact of Djamu.

IRM informed four core methodological commitments in this evaluation. First, the evaluation was grounded in relational accountability**.** Researchers understood themselves as accountable not only to institutional ethics and governance processes, but also to young people, their families and communities, Elders, staff, and the broader network of Aboriginal organisations connected to Djamu (Wilson, 2008). Relational accountability was enacted through transparent communication with sites, careful planning around interview times, respectful engagement with centre routines, and ongoing feedback loops with Elders and AGNSW practitioners. Where possible, local cultural protocols were observed, including acknowledging Country at the beginning of visits, allowing time for informal introductions, and providing opportunities for debriefing after interviews.

Second, the evaluation treated story as data**.** In line with IRM, the evaluation recognised that stories communicated through words, artwork, gesture, humour, metaphor, silence, and emotion constitute valid and central forms of data (Martin, 2008). Young people's narratives about identity, shame, pride, hope, anger, loss, and belonging were not treated as anecdotal additions but as core evidence of Djamu's impact.

Third, cultural safety was prioritised in all interactions. This included creating spaces that maximised participant comfort, ensuring that participants had control over what they discussed, and supporting them to withdraw from the process at any time without consequence. Youth, staff, artists, and Elders were invited to choose where and how they wished to be interviewed, including the option to meet in quieter rooms, classrooms, outdoor areas, or workshop spaces. Aboriginal staff and cultural practitioners supported the research process where possible, and interviews were scheduled to minimise disruption to cultural activities and to avoid periods of heightened custodial stress.

Fourth, the evaluation adopted a strengths-based orientation. Consistent with Indigenous social and emotional wellbeing frameworks, the evaluation centred strengths, resilience, aspirations, and cultural connection rather than deficits or pathology (Gee et al., 2014). Although young people often described experiences of trauma, grief, and systemic harm, the analysis focused on how Djamu created opportunities for healing, pride, self-expression, and cultural reconnection. Staff and Elders were also invited to identify what was working well, and to describe areas where systems demonstrated capacity for change.

These IRM commitments shaped the choice of data collection techniques, the analysis strategies, and the presentation of findings. The use of culturally resonant models and visuals, including shield metaphors, identity cycles, the Three Selves model, and environmental diagrams such as the Country vs Concrete model, provided meaningful ways to represent complex processes of identity disruption and repair.

4.3 Research Questions

The methodology was structured around seven agreed Research Questions (RQs), each focusing on a specific dimension of Djamu's cultural and rehabilitative impact.

> The first question explored how Djamu supports young people's **meaningful cultural connection**, including connection to Aboriginal culture, identity, Country, and community inside custody and in preparation for life after custody.
>
> The second question examined **relationships with Aboriginal artists, Elders, and community**, and considered how these relationships shape young people's experiences of safety, trust, belonging, and role modelling.
>
> The third question investigated **mentorship and vocational pathways**, asking whether Djamu participation opens realistic pathways into further education, training, creative practice, or employment, and how young people conceptualise these possibilities.
>
> The fourth question addressed **understanding of Aboriginal art and culture**, focusing on the ways Djamu deepens participants' appreciation of Aboriginal art, cultural protocols, story, and history, and how they express this learning.
>
> The fifth question examined **staff capability and cultural engagement**, exploring how Djamu influences staff members' cultural capability, attitudes, confidence, and willingness to engage with Aboriginal art, identity, and healing-oriented practices.
>
> The sixth question focused on **workforce development**, identifying what professional learning, structural supports, and systemic changes are required to embed Djamu-like programs within Youth Justice, and the extent to which Djamu contributes to workforce development.
>
> The seventh question considered **what young people needed before custody**, drawing on participants' reflections about the cultural, emotional, relational, and practical supports that might have helped them avoid custody, and how a program like Djamu could operate in community settings.

These research questions were operationalised into semi-structured interview schedules tailored for youth, staff, artists, and Elders. The schedules provided consistent coverage of core topics while leaving sufficient flexibility to follow participants' priorities and responses.

4.4 Sampling and Recruitment

4.4.1 Youth Participants

A purposive sampling strategy was used to recruit young people who could speak directly about the experience and impact of Djamu. Across five centres—Riverina (Wagga Wagga), Reiby (Campbelltown), Frank Baxter (Kariong), Cobham (St Marys), and Orana (Dubbo)—a total of 40 young people participated in interviews. As detailed in Table 1 below, only five of these young people had participated in the Djamu program at the time of the interviews, and not all young people were First Nations. Due to the geographical spread of the five centres, the changes in staff and participants, and low uptake of the Djamu program, the evaluation

team determined that it was important to speak to a broader range of young people to gain an understanding of their needs in relation to cultural engagement programs.

Young people were eligible to participate if they had taken part in at least one Djamu workshop or series. Eligible participants either identified as Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander or were culturally diverse participants who had engaged with Djamu as part of their learning. All participants were required to be willing and able to provide informed assent and/or consent. Youth Justice NSW staff assisted in identifying young people who met these criteria; however, the decision to participate was voluntary and was emphasised as such in all communications.

Table 1. Djamu Youth Justice evaluation sample profile (young people)

Measure	Result
Young people interviewed (13-20)	39
Distinct young people interviewed (Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander)	32
Distinct young people interviewed (Middle Eastern)	2
Distinct young people interviewed (Pacifika: Māori, Tongan and Samoan)	4
Distinct young people interviewed (African)	1
Total interview events (counting one person interviewed at two sites)	40
Number of Youth Justice NSW centres included	5
Centres included	Riverina; Frank Baxter; Reiby; Cobham; Orana
Interview format	Individual and small-group/paired interviews (dyadic and peer group narratives)
Age profile (available evidence)	Predominantly mid-to-late adolescence (~14–18), with some younger children and some older youth into early adulthood (not systematically recorded)
Gender profile (available evidence)	Predominantly male, with a smaller number of young women (not systematically recorded)
Cultural identity	All participants identified as Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander

Table 2. Distribution of youth interview events by centre (n = 40 interview events)

Centre	Interview events (n)	Share of interview events
Riverina	13	32.5%
Frank Baxter	11	27.5%
Reiby	7	17.5%
Cobham	5	12.5%
Orana	4	10.0%
Total	**40**	**100%**

Note: One participant was interviewed at two sites at different points in their journey; interview events therefore exceed distinct participants.

The final youth sample was diverse in age, ranging from 10 to 21 years, and in cultural heritage, including Aboriginal, Torres Strait Islander, Māori, Pasifika, African, and Middle Eastern backgrounds (see Table 1). Participants differed in their level of engagement with Djamu and in their previous contact with culture. Some young people reported strong, ongoing ties to community and culture prior to custody, whereas others described Djamu as their first meaningful engagement with Aboriginal cultural practice. This diversity enabled the evaluation to capture a broad spectrum of identity journeys and experiences of cultural reconnection.

4.4.2 Staff Participants

Interviews were conducted with 20 staff members across the five centres (See below table 3). Staff included Youth Officers, psychologists, program staff, teachers, Assistant Principals, Cultural Liaison Officers, Aboriginal Education Officers, and Justice Health clinicians. This mix of roles created an opportunity to develop a cross-system view of Djamu's operational, cultural, and behavioural impacts.

Some staff had been closely involved in supporting Djamu from its inception, while others had engaged with the program more intermittently or from adjacent positions. Including a range of staff perspectives allowed the evaluation to examine how Djamu interacted with existing routines, security requirements, education programs, and behavioural management practices, and how it was perceived by staff with different levels of cultural knowledge and experience.

Three staff members from the Art Gallery of NSW were also interviewed. These staff members provided important perspectives into the origins and intention of the program, how it is situated within other First Nations-focussed programming within the Art Gallery, program governance and structure, and intentions for program expansion.

Table 3. Djamu Youth Justice evaluation Staffing profile (staff and stakeholders)

Measure	Result
Staff interview / focus group events	8
Approximate number of staff represented (due to group interviews)	23
Role groups included	Educators; Aboriginal Education Officers; psychologists; Justice Health clinicians; programs staff; Youth Officers; other custodial staff; AGNSW staff
Centre coverage	Multiple centres (across Riverina, Frank Baxter, Reiby, Cobham, Orana)
Contribution to evaluation	Contextualised quantitative patterns; described implementation conditions; interpreted observed behavioural and cultural changes; identified enablers and constraints

4.4.3 Artists and Elders

AGNSW cultural practitioners and Elders participated across the different Djamu programs and program phases. Their insights were essential for understanding the design and delivery of Djamu, the creation of cultural safety within custodial environments, and the relational aspects of identity strengthening and healing through artmaking.

Artists and Elders have responsibilities to community, the emotional labour of working with young people in custody, and the supports they required from YJNSW and AGNSW to sustain culturally safe practice. Their involvement and inclusion, specifically in extending Djamu beyond custody and maintaining continuity of cultural relationships after release is critical. All five Youth Justice NSW centres participated in the evaluation. Individual staff, Artist and Elder involvement varied by site.

4.5 Data Collection

4.5.1 Youth Interviews

All youth interviews employed a semi-structured, conversational format. Interview guides were used to ensure coverage of key topics related to the seven research questions, while allowing enough flexibility to follow participants' interests, priorities, and emotional cues. Interviews typically lasted between 20 and 60 minutes, depending on the young person's comfort, attention, and the operational conditions in each centre. All young people were provided with a $100 Active Group gift voucher that was left in their belongings at the centre as a physical voucher, and which was available to them upon their release from custody.

Questions invited young people to reflect on their experience of the workshops; their relationships with artists, Elders, and staff; their feelings before and after sessions; what they had learned about themselves and culture; and what they wished had been available to them in the community. Participants were reminded that they did not have to answer any question

that made them uncomfortable and that they could end the interview at any time. Where participants indicated that they had not participated in Djamu, or where their participation was limited, questions focussed on their perspectives on the programs that were available and their experiences of cultural safety within custodial environments. Selected quotations from these interviews appear throughout the report.

4.5.2 Staff Interviews

Staff interviews also used semi-structured guides tailored to each role type. Interview topics included staff observations of youth behaviour and mood; perceived changes in relationships and communication; experiences of working alongside Elders and artists; operational enablers and barriers; and reflections on cultural capability and institutional culture. Staff were encouraged to differentiate between narrow understandings of program participation, such as attendance and completion, and the deeper relational, cultural, and emotional work occurring in Djamu sessions. They were also invited to discuss instances in which institutional rules or practices conflicted with cultural requirements, as well as examples where the system supported Djamu to flourish.

4.6 Ethical Considerations and Approval

Ethical approval for the evaluation was granted by the University of Technology Sydney Human Research Ethics Committee (ETH24-9721), the Youth Justice NSW Ethics and Research Governance Unit approval, and the relevant AGNSW programming approval processes. The evaluation was conducted in accordance with the National Health and Medical Research Council guidelines on ethical conduct in research with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples and communities (National Health and Medical Research Council [NHMRC], 2018), as well as institutional requirements for research in custodial environments.

Informed consent and assent were central to the methodology. Youth participants provided informed assent through processes that used age-appropriate and accessible language. For participants under 18 years of age, appropriate custodial guardianship arrangements were followed in line with Youth Justice NSW requirements. Adult participants, including staff, artists, and Elders, provided written informed consent. Confidentiality and pseudonymisation were maintained at all stages. Names and identifying details were either replaced with pseudonyms or removed entirely, and care was taken to de-identify specific stories that could allow individuals to be recognised within small centre environments. Cultural safety protocols were implemented in consultation with the Elders Cultural Governance Reference Group and local Aboriginal staff. Interview guides were reviewed for cultural appropriateness. Where possible, Aboriginal researchers or cultural practitioners were present during youth interviews and program observations, and culturally specific considerations were integrated into scheduling and conduct.

The evaluation embedded trauma-informed principles in recognition of the high prevalence of trauma among young people in custody (Atkinson, 2017; Dudgeon et al., 2014). Researchers used sensitive and non-intrusive questioning, monitored signs of distress, and paused or ended interviews if required. Participants were reminded that they could decline to answer any question and that support pathways were available through Youth Justice and allied health services.

Participation was strictly voluntary, and withdrawal without consequence was emphasised. At the date of submitting the report there has been no withdrawals. Young people were explicitly informed that their decision to participate or decline would not influence their legal status, case management, access to programs, or privileges. To minimise perceived coercion, recruitment was conducted in collaboration with staff but with clear messaging that the evaluation was independent of disciplinary and behavioural regimes.

4.7 Data Analysis

Data analysis combined inductive and interpretive approaches to honour the richness of participants' stories while ensuring systematic and transparent procedures. Reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2021) informed the analysis of all interview data. Transcripts of youth interviews were coded inductively to identify recurring patterns in how young people described identity, shame, pride, belonging, anger, calm, hope, and future orientation. Metaphors and images, including shields, scars, storms, trees, and horizons, were examined as meaningful representations of participants' experiences and identity journeys. Interviews were coded to identify themes related to cultural capability, institutional culture, operational constraints, workforce development, and the perceived impact of Djamu on relationships, behaviour, and emotional regulation. Candidate themes were refined through iterative discussion within the research team.

All transcripts and field notes were imported into NVivo software to support systematic coding. A structured coding framework was developed that combined deductive codes aligned to the seven research questions with inductive codes that emerged across sites. Coding categories included dimensions of cultural identity and connection, emotional language and regulation, relational dynamics, environmental determinants, and systemic barriers and enablers.

Ensuring rigour and cultural integrity was central to the evaluation design. Triangulation was achieved by comparing data across participant groups (youth and staff), methods (interviews and document review), and sites (five Youth Justice centres). Convergences and divergences in accounts were examined in order to understand how program impacts manifested differently across locations and under varying operational conditions.

4.8 Limitations

Several limitations should be taken into account when interpreting the findings of this evaluation.

Custodial constraints limited the time, mobility, and privacy available for youth interviews. Lockdowns, movements between units, and security incidents occasionally interrupted or shortened interviews and observations. Some interviews took place in spaces where staff or peers were nearby, which may have influenced how comfortable young people felt in sharing certain aspects of their stories. Operational disruptions, including staffing shortages, program clashes, and centre-wide restrictions, affected access to Djamu workshops. As a result, some participants had limited exposure to the program, and experiences of intermittent or "stop–start" delivery formed part of the data.

Centre environments differed significantly, particularly regarding access to outdoor areas and quieter rooms. These differences shaped how young people experienced and described the

program. While the sample size at some sites was relatively small, the strength of the evaluation lies in the depth, richness, and consistency of themes across multiple centres, and in the triangulation of youth, staff, artist, and Elder perspectives.

Despite these limitations, saturation of key themes was reached across the data set. The combination of multiple data sources and strong cultural governance provides confidence that the evaluation offers a robust and credible account of Djamu's impacts.

PART IV — FINDINGS BY RESEARCH QUESTION

This section provides a detailed analysis of the data presented against each of the research questions that informed the evaluation. Overarching the findings, however, is a central organising theme that frames the perceived impact of the Djamu program: Culture → Identity → Rehabilitation, which conceptualises cultural grounding as the first step in behavioural and emotional transformation. This theme reflects consistent patterns across all interviews that position culture, identity and rehabilitation as central and unique features that differentiate Djamu from other programs and that help to explain it's perceived impact. These include:

- Culture provides safety, belonging and connection
- These foundations allow young people to strengthen Identity
- A strong identity supports emotional regulation, trust, prosocial behaviour and Rehabilitation

Young people expressed this model intuitively. As one youth explained:
"When I feel connected, I don't feel like smashing things up. I feel normal." — Bob

Staff also grasped this sequence, noting:
"Djamu stabilises them emotionally first. Only after that can therapy or schooling work properly." — Billy (Psychologist)

RQ1: How has the program created meaningful connections to art and culture?

The first research question explores how the Djamu Youth Justice Program has supported young people to build meaningful connections to art and culture during their time in custody. Themes emerging from the interview data reveal that artmaking and cultural practice offered participants a rare space for reflection, identity exploration, emotional regulation and cultural pride. Across all five centres—Cobham, Reiby, Frank Baxter, Riverina and Orana—young people consistently described Djamu not simply as an art program but as a cultural experience that shifted their understanding of self and strengthened their sense of belonging.

The analysis below presents four interrelated domains through which Djamu facilitated cultural connection: (1) cultural grounding and belonging; (2) artmaking as a cultural language; (3) reconnection to ancestry, family and Country; and (4) increased cultural confidence and pride. These domains align closely with Indigenous wellbeing models (Gee et al., 2014) and with the program's theoretical foundations articulated earlier.

5.1 Cultural Grounding and Belonging

The most consistent theme across interviews was the depth of cultural grounding experienced by participants. For many young people, Djamu constituted their first sustained exposure to Aboriginal cultural knowledge, stories, symbols and practices. Several participants expressed that before Djamu they knew very little about their heritage, often due to fragmented family histories, child protection involvement or disconnection from community. One young man explained: *"I didn't grow up with my culture. I knew I was Koori but I didn't know what it meant. Djamu is the first time someone actually explained it to me." — John*. This sense of "cultural first contact" echoes literature on cultural revitalisation as a turning point for Aboriginal young people who have experienced systemic displacement (Dudgeon et al., 2014; Dockery, 2020).

Participants frequently described Djamu as providing clarity, identity and a sense of place. Another youth said, *"It makes me feel like I've got roots. Like I'm from somewhere." — LJ* These reflections underscore the profound role that cultural grounding plays in emotional stability and belonging. Several young people stated that Djamu made them "feel safe," "feel calm," or "feel like myself." The relational atmosphere created by Elders and Aboriginal artists was central to this sense of safety. Staff across centres observed that Djamu produced a "settled" or "quiet" emotional environment, suggesting that cultural engagement helped stabilise behaviour. A Youth Officer at Riverina summarised this effect: *"When Djamu is on, the whole unit feels different. They settle. They listen. They focus. Culture changes the whole room." — Nathan* This aligns with trauma-informed literature arguing that cultural safety and predictability form essential foundations for emotional regulation (Isobel et al., 2021).

5.2 Artmaking as a Cultural Language

Young people described art as a medium for expressing feelings, memories and identities they struggled to articulate verbally. Art became, in their words, "a language," "an outlet," "a release," and "a way of telling my story." Artmaking allowed them to explore cultural concepts symbolically without the pressure of spoken disclosure.

One young person explained:
"I can talk through the painting. I don't have to say it out loud." — Elliot

Another described art as helping him to process emotions:
"It slows my head down. I don't feel angry when I'm painting." — Bob

This was supported by Art Gallery staff who described cultural making (i.e., boomerangs, shields, carvings, weaving, gardens) as both enjoyable and identity-forming, especially for young people with limited prior access to cultural practice: *"They're not just making things… they're making things and telling a story with it"* (AGNSW 3).

These statements align with art therapy scholarship that emphasises the role of creative practice in supporting trauma-affected youth to engage in safe symbolic expression (Bennink, et al. 2003; Malchiodi, 2012; Perry & Szalavitz, 2017). In Djamu, artmaking was consciously linked to Aboriginal visual traditions, including linework, patterns, storytelling, shield design and colour symbolism. By engaging with these forms, young people participated in cultural meaning-making rather than producing art in isolation from cultural context. Participants frequently described the shield-making process as emotionally significant, *"The shield is like*

who you are. You put your whole life on it." — Reece. The shield motif enabled young people to translate complex experiences into cultural form, supporting narrative reconstruction and meaning-making consistent with both cultural identity theory (Kleinert, 2012) and trauma-informed practice.

5.3 Reconnection to Family, Ancestry and Country

Another key domain of cultural connection emerged in the way young people used their artworks to reconnect with family, ancestry and Country. Many participants described incorporating symbols such as totems, clan markers, birthplaces, rivers and animals into their pieces. This act of artistic incorporation became a way of situating themselves within cultural storylines. One youth reported: *"I put my Pop's totem on mine. He passed away but having it there makes me feel like he's with me." — James*. Another described drawing his home Country: *"I painted my river. When I look at it, I can see home." — Jace*. These reflections demonstrate the significance of cultural revival for young people who have experienced disrupted family connections or intergenerational trauma. Art enabled them to symbolically return to Country and family, even within the confines of detention.

This process reflects Indigenous relational ontology, which emphasises the enduring relationship between the self, ancestors, kin, land and spirits (Martin, 2008; Wilson, 2008). By embedding these elements in their artwork, participants were actively reconstructing cultural identities and reclaiming narratives that had been disrupted by systemic forces such as removal, exclusion and incarceration.

5.5 Developing Cultural Confidence and Pride

Engagement with Djamu appeared to foster significant growth in cultural pride and self-confidence. Young people reported feeling "proud," "strong," and "more like myself" during and after sessions. These transformations were not superficial but were reflected in observable behavioural changes and emotional shifts. One young man said: *"I feel proud when I'm painting because it's my culture. I've never felt proud before." — Ashley* Another expressed: *"It makes me feel like I'm part of something good, not just jail." — Trey*.

Some young people stated that Djamu was "*the only program that feels like us*," or that they now understood what being Aboriginal meant in ways that were distinct from criminalising stereotypes. Others reflected that if similar programs had been available in the community, they might have avoided custody. These statements illustrate how participants distinguished between deficit-focused narratives about Aboriginal identity and more positive, culturally grounded understandings of themselves.

Staff corroborated these observations, noting visible increases in confidence, respectfulness and self-awareness after sessions – *"the boys have really grown and developed confidence… confidence with their cultural identity"* (AGNSW 1). Several educators and Youth Officers commented that Djamu participants took more care with their communication, supported peers, and displayed leadership behaviours. For example, a staff member at Orana reflected: *"They hold themselves differently when Djamu is on. There's pride in them. You can see it." — Danielle (Education).* Similarly, Art Gallery staff viewed the increased confidence expressed through the young men's willingness to take on greater responsibilities within the program – *"Some [of the boys] lead the session… another boy would do an*

acknowledgement… another boy would do the karakiya. It's like a shared responsibility" (AGNSW 1).

The literature strongly supports these findings. Strength-based Indigenous practice emphasises that cultural identity is a predictor of resilience and desistance (Shepherd et al., 2014). When young people feel pride in their identity, they are better able to imagine prosocial futures and reject criminal labels (Maruna, 2001; McNeill, 2012; Harding et al. 2017).

5.6 Emotional Safety and Regulation Through Culture

Cultural engagement also played a central role in emotional regulation. Many young people described Djamu as a space where they felt calm, respected and less reactive. The slow, grounding nature of the sessions helped settle their nervous systems and reduce hypervigilance. As one youth said: *"Djamu is the only place I don't feel on edge." — Billy-Bob*, another explained, *"It chills me out. I feel like I can breathe properly." — Metto*

These reflections align with trauma research emphasising that sensory-based cultural practices support regulation and healing for young people experiencing trauma, grief and hyperarousal (van der Kolk, 2014). They also resonate with Indigenous healing models, which position cultural connection as a pathway to emotional balance (Atkinson, 2002).

5.7 Summary

The data demonstrate that Djamu successfully created profound and meaningful connections to art and culture for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people. This connection occurred through symbolic artmaking, cultural knowledge transmission, reconnection to family and Country, strengthened cultural identity and emotional regulation supported by relational safety. Young people described Djamu not simply as a program but as an experience of belonging—one that allowed them to reclaim cultural knowledge, express emotions, rebuild identity and imagine new narratives for their futures. Staff observations corroborated these impacts, reinforcing that Djamu contributes to calmer environments, improved relationships and enhanced cultural pride among young people in custody.

RQ2: Does the program create positive relationships between participants and members of the Aboriginal arts community?

The second research question examines whether—and how—the Djamu Youth Justice Program fosters positive, culturally meaningful relationships between young people in detention and members of the Aboriginal arts community. The literature emphasises that relationships with Elders, cultural practitioners, and community role models are central to cultural identity, healing and desistance (Gee et al., 2014; Dudgeon et al., 2014; Shepherd et al., 2014). The evaluation findings demonstrate that Djamu deeply aligns with this principle. Young people across all five centres consistently described developing strong, respectful and trusting relationships with Djamu facilitators—relationships fundamentally different from those they typically experience within custodial environments. These relationships supported emotional safety and behavioural change.

This section presents three interconnected themes: (1) relational trust and emotional safety; (2) recognition, respect and cultural authority; and (3) the bridging of custodial spaces with

the Aboriginal arts community. Together, these themes demonstrate that Djamu's greatest strength lies not only in its artmaking content but in its capacity to create powerful relational bonds grounded in culture, respect and mutual recognition.

6.1 Relational Trust and Emotional Safety

A central finding across the interviews was the depth of trust participants developed with Djamu facilitators. Many young people expressed that they struggle to trust adults in custody, including staff, clinicians or counsellors, often due to histories of trauma, removal, or conflict with institutional authority. Yet Djamu practitioners were repeatedly described as "trustworthy," "safe," "calm," and "not judging." One participant explained:
"I don't trust many staff in here, but I trust the Djamu mob. They actually listen." — Trey
Another said, *"When they come in, I feel relaxed straight away. They're real with you." — Elliot*

These quotations reflect the crucial role relational trust plays in trauma recovery. Trauma theory emphasises that trust cannot be forced; it must be earned through consistent, respectful and culturally safe practice (Isobel et al., 2021; van der Kolk, 2014). Djamu practitioners, all of whom are Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander artists or educators, establish rapport through relational conversation, shared cultural understanding and genuine interest in the wellbeing of participants.

Staff also observed that the presence of Djamu practitioners transformed the emotional environment of units. A Youth Officer noted: *"The boys drop their guard with Djamu. They're calmer, more themselves." — Emma*. This observation reflects a wider international pattern: Indigenous youth respond more openly and respectfully to cultural authorities than to institutional staff (Tauri, 2014; Kingi, 2018). Djamu's capacity to generate relational safety therefore forms one of its most significant impacts.

6.2 Recognition, Respect and Cultural Authority

A second major theme was the cultural authority that Djamu artists and Elders bring into custodial spaces. Participants repeatedly stated that they felt "seen," "valued," and "respected" by Djamu facilitators in ways they did not experience elsewhere in detention. This recognition was not superficial; it was culturally grounded, conveying to young people that they had worth, identity and potential. James expressed this powerfully *"They treat us like we're someone. Like we're part of something bigger."* Additionally, Reece felt *"I feel respected by them, so I respect them back." — Reece*. This bidirectional respect is central to Indigenous relational ethics, in which recognition of cultural identity and humanity fosters reciprocal responsibility (Wilson, 2008; Martin, 2008). Djamu artists embody this relational ethic, interacting with young people not as offenders but as cultural learners and emerging artists.

Multiple staff mentioned that Djamu facilitators are among the few external adults who immediately and consistently command the respect of young people. This is not through authority or discipline but through cultural legitimacy. In trauma-informed and culturally grounded practice literature, this form of recognition is understood as a prerequisite for identity reconstruction and desistance (McNeill, 2012; Maruna, 2001).

6.3 Bridging Custodial Spaces with the Aboriginal Arts Community

Djamu also functioned as a bridge between detention and the broader Aboriginal arts community. Art Gallery staff, for example, emphasised the importance of having a major cultural institution confer legitimacy, resourcing, access to artists/collections and exposure to possible career paths as an important element of Djamu. This type of legitimacy can signal both care and investment to young people who have often been marginalised and stigmatised by virtue of their culture and their criminal legal system involvement. As Art Gallery staff noted, *"it's such a big institution… [with] resources and support [that can be] put into justice centre's… it's a special thing"* (AGNSW 3). In theory, Djamu could extend to post-release support, acting as a *"thread of connection"* (AGNSW 3) for young people.

For many participants, the type of connection experienced with Djamu artists was unprecedented. Young people described feeling proud that "real artists" from the Gallery were interested in their work. This sense of external recognition helped counteract feelings of isolation and stigma commonly experienced in custody. Skye reflected: *"It feels deadly having people from the Gallery come in. Makes you feel like your art matters."* Wally also explained *"It connects you back to the outside world. Not the bad parts—like the good parts."*. Similarly, Art Gallery staff noted the pride engendered in young people through their association with Djamu, stating *"if you get to see [your art work]] on display somewhere… it's such an elevating feeling"* (AGNSW 3).

Connections to AGNSW provided a rare sense of cultural mobility: participants felt linked to a prestigious cultural institution that valued Aboriginal knowledge and creativity. This pathway aligns with research showing that access to cultural institutions increases confidence, belonging and educational engagement for marginalised youth (Smith, 2012; Kleinert, 2012). Several staff highlighted that Djamu was one of the few programs in the centres with strong community links. These connections offer potential post-release opportunities, contributing to continuity of cultural identity beyond custody.

6.4 Summary

The findings demonstrate that Djamu creates significant, meaningful and culturally grounded relationships between young people and members of the Aboriginal arts community. These relationships are characterised by deep trust, mutual respect, cultural authority, mentorship, emotional safety and identity-building. Young people consistently described Djamu practitioners as "real," "calm," "fair," and "people who listen," signalling a level of trust not commonly experienced within justice settings. The program thus fulfils a critical function in youth justice: it reconnects young people to Aboriginal community, culture and role models who embody cultural pride, resilience and creativity. The relationships built within Djamu contribute directly to emotional regulation, behavioural change, identity transformation and hope for the future.

These findings strongly support the broader evidence that culturally matched mentors, Elders and practitioners play a central role in healing, desistance and cultural identity formation for Indigenous young people in custody (Shepherd et al., 2014; Wexler, 2009). Djamu serves as an example of how culturally grounded relational practice can create pathways toward restored cultural identity and long-term rehabilitation.

RQ3: Has the program created mentorship and vocational pathways for participants?

The third research question explores whether the Djamu Youth Justice Program creates mentorship opportunities and vocational pathways for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people in custody. Mentorship and pathways are essential components of effective youth justice programming. For Aboriginal young people, cultural mentorship and culturally grounded role models play a particularly powerful role in strengthening identity, confidence and future orientation (Shepherd et al., 2014).

The interview data demonstrate that Djamu has established a meaningful form of cultural mentorship that supports identity strengthening, emotional regulation, confidence and aspiration. Djamu has also sparked genuine interest in vocational opportunities—particularly in the arts—for a significant proportion of participants. While structural barriers within the youth justice system limit the extent of formal pathways currently available, participants and staff strongly affirmed that Djamu inspires vocational ambition, increases confidence and opens relational doors to new possibilities. This section presents five interconnected themes:

(1) the importance of mentorship and role modelling.
(2) Cultural and relational guidance.
(3) the emergence of positive future identities through art and culture.
(4) vocational aspirations and interest in creative careers.
(5) structural barriers and opportunities for strengthening post-release pathways.

7.1 Mentorship, Role Modelling and Aspirational Identity

Participants often described Djamu practitioners as mentors or role models—individuals whose life stories, cultural knowledge and artistic practices inspired them to imagine new possibilities for themselves. Many expressed admirations for facilitators' achievements, cultural pride and calm demeanour. As Bob explained, *"I want to be like them—calm, not angry all the time. Doing something good." — Bob*. Whereas Jace felt, *"They show you what you can be. They show you a future."* These discussions reflect elements of desistance theory, which emphasises the importance of "possible selves"—prosocial identities that young people can realistically envision and pursue (Farrall & Calverley, 2006). Djamu facilitators, many of whom have overcome adversity or developed successful artistic careers, embodied these possible selves.

Some participants expressed interest in pursuing art professionally, seeking mentorship beyond the program. One youth stated: *"I didn't think art was a job until Djamu. Now I want to keep doing it when I get out." — Ashley.* Others asked facilitators how to join AGNSW programs post-release, demonstrating that Djamu created a bridge to vocational and cultural pathways. Staff also noted that young people paid close attention to the guidance, feedback and stories offered by practitioners. As one psychologist explained, *"They listen differently to Djamu artists. There's openness, curiosity. They want to impress them." — Billy (Psychologist)* This form of mentorship aligns with international findings that culturally matched mentors enhance rehabilitation and strengthen identity among Indigenous youth (Wexler, 2009; Ritchie, 2014).

7.2 Cultural and relational guidance

One of the unique elements of Djamu is the way relational methods are employed within sessions. Facilitators relied heavily on yarning**,** relational conversation, deep listening and storywork—practices deeply embedded in Aboriginal pedagogy. These cultural forms of dialogue helped young people feel heard, validated and safe. As Matteo insisted, "*They yarn with you properly. Not rushing, not judging. Makes you open up."*

The relational method also created opportunities for cultural storytelling, through which Elders and artists shared personal histories, cultural knowledge and life lessons. Young people described these stories as inspirational and calming. Trey also thought, *"Hearing their stories makes me think about mine. Like, what do I want my story to be?" — Trey*. Such storytelling practices align with Indigenous knowledge systems, in which learning occurs through narrative rather than instruction (Martin & Mirraboopa, 2003). They also reflect trauma-informed relational models that prioritise attuned dialogue and co-regulation (Isobel et al., 2021).

The strongest and most consistent finding related to mentorship was that Djamu practitioners became significant cultural mentors for young people—figures who provided guidance, emotional safety and genuine care. Participants described facilitators as "big brothers," "aunties," "uncles," or "mob," using familial terms that reflect deep relational trust.

One participant said, *"They're like family in here. They don't talk down to you. They teach you properly." — James* Another explained: *"Djamu artists know where we come from. They understand us. They don't judge." — Ashley* These remarks illustrate how cultural mentorship differs fundamentally from institutional authority. Djamu mentors bring lived experience, cultural legitimacy and relational ethics rooted in respect and reciprocity. They model calmness, patience, cultural pride and pro-social behaviour, which young people notice and mirror. One youth stated: *"I watch how they talk, how they move. I want to be like that when I get out." — Bob* This aspiration demonstrates the role of cultural mentors in shaping identity formation. Staff also emphasised that Djamu facilitators had a unique ability to "reach" young people. A psychologist at Reiby noted: *"Some of these boys haven't had one consistent mentor in their life. Djamu provides that consistency—even if it's just one day a week." — Skyler* This aligns with trauma-informed scholarship emphasising that predictable, emotionally attuned relationships support healing and behavioural stability (Isobel et al., 2021).

7.3. Gender, Masculinities, young men, and the "Obligation-in-Place" problem in Djamu Youth Justice

Across the Djamu Youth Justice interviews, a quiet but consistent finding was how the program disrupted the dominant custodial "performance" expected of young men: toughness, emotional shutdown, bravado, and readiness for conflict. In units where respect is often negotiated through threat, posture, and the policing of vulnerability, Djamu created a different social script—one where status was earned through patience, craft, cultural knowledge, humour, care for others, and the ability to sit with feeling without escalating. Young people described this shift directly through regulation and self-control: "When I feel connected, I don't feel like smashing things up. I feel normal." — Bob. In the same way, staff linked cultural grounding to behavioural stabilisation: "Djamu stabilises them emotionally first. Only after that can therapy or schooling work properly." — Billy (Psychologist).

Together, these accounts suggest that Djamu is not simply engaging young men in art and their culture; it is temporarily re-ordering the relational field in which masculinity is produced inside detention.

This matters because, in settler-colonial contexts, institutions don't just observe male behaviour—they actively *produce* categories of masculinity (and fatherhood) through separation, surveillance, and conditional recognition. The "absent father" narrative is a clear example: fathering becomes administratively possible or impossible depending on place—remand, bail, distance, supervised contact, housing insecurity, and the bureaucratic documentation that authorises legitimacy. In this ecology, masculinity is frequently shaped by what Lockwood and Williamson describe as a dispersed colonial–carceral archipelago, where Indigenous men are criminalised through settler perceptions and "invader masculinities" that mark them as risky, violent, or deficient (Lockwood & Williamson, 2022). Djamu's interviews echo this system pressure in everyday form: "One week you get someone who's deadly. Next week you get someone who talks down to you." — Roy (Riverina); "They shut it down for nothing… We lose our groove." — Kevin (Frank Baxter). These disruptions are not neutral—they reinforce institutional power and re-trigger the defensive masculine stance that custody rewards.

Djamu works *against* that production. It generates an "Obligation-in-Place" alternative—where recognition is distributed across kinship, culture, and relational responsibility rather than individual compliance. Young men repeatedly described facilitators as "family" in the unit, and staff saw how respect emerged without coercion: "The boys drop their guard with Djamu. They're calmer, more themselves." — Emma (YO). In sessions, young men practiced forms of masculinity aligned with cultural obligation: making for others, acknowledging Country, learning protocols, helping peers, and holding pride without dominance. "If staff respect our culture, we respect them more." — Billy-Bob. This is a crucial inversion: rather than masculinity being managed through discipline, it becomes reorganised through recognition, cultural authority, and belonging—conditions that many participants explicitly stated were missing *before* custody.

7.4 Identity Aspirations and Imagining a Positive Future

A major component of vocational development is the ability to imagine a "future self" (Ibrahim, et al. 2022). Desistance research suggests that new behavioural trajectories emerge when young people can picture themselves in positive, achievable futures (Maruna, 2001; Farrall & Calverley, 2006). Djamu played a central role in this process.

Young people repeatedly described imagining themselves as artists, cultural practitioners, youth mentors or community teachers. They also articulated a desire to be better for their families, communities and younger siblings. One youth said: *"Djamu makes me want to do something good with my life. Not go back to the streets." — Trey* Another reflected: *"I feel like I could actually do art outside. Like properly. I didn't think that before." — Skye* This shift in self-perception is consistent with Indigenous resilience literature, which highlights that cultural affirmation strengthens agency, hope and long-term wellbeing (Dudgeon et al., 2014; Gee et al., 2014). Staff identified similar changes: *"They talk about their futures differently after Djamu. It gives them something to aim for." — Danielle (Education)* These reflections illustrate that Djamu operates not merely as a program but as a catalyst for identity transformation.

7.5 Vocational Interest in Art, Creative Industries and Culture Work

Several participants expressed concrete interest in pursuing vocational pathways in the arts. Some young people described wanting to become visual artists, tattoo artists, muralists, cultural educators or workshop facilitators. Others simply wanted to "do art on the outside" as a healthy alternative to boredom, stress or peer pressure.

One participant said: *"I want to keep painting. Maybe sell my art one day." — Reece*. Another expressed interest in cultural leadership: *"I'd like to teach kids about culture one day. Show them they can be proud." — Jace* These aspirations indicate that artmaking had become more than a temporary distraction—it had become a meaningful skill and source of pride. Several staff noted that Djamu helped young people discover and develop talents they did not know they had. A Youth Officer at Orana observed: *"Some of these boys have real talent. It's the first time I've seen them concentrate for 90 minutes straight." — Kevin*

The program's ability to create vocational aspiration aligns with creative industries research, which shows that artmaking fosters transferable skills such as discipline, patience, reflection, goal setting and problem solving (Hughes, 2005). AGNSW staff also mentioned that they would welcome further collaboration to support artistic pathways post-release, including exhibition opportunities, youth programs and internships. This potential is explored further in the Recommendations chapter.

7.6 Barriers to Vocational Pathways in the Current Youth Justice System

While Djamu clearly ignited vocational interest, several barriers limit the program's ability to establish formal pathways. These include:

- the short length of many custodial stays
- restrictions on materials and tools
- limited continuity across centres
- lack of post-release support structures
- limited community-based art programs for high-risk youth
- systemic barriers faced by Aboriginal young people (racism, exclusion, unstable housing, school disengagement)

These barriers were emphasised by staff. An educator explained: *"The boys are inspired, but once they leave custody, there's very little structure to keep them going." — Danielle.* A program worker added: *"We need proper pathways. Not just inspiration—actual supported transitions." — Lynne (Programs)*. Young people also identified these gaps. One youth expressed concern about opportunities outside custody:
"I don't know where to go for art out there. I don't know the places." — Billy-Bob

The literature similarly underscores that vocational pathways require stable support networks, mentors, accessible resources and community connection (Smith, 2012; Maxwell & Morris, 2006). Djamu's strong cultural and relational foundation offers an ideal base for developing such pathways.

7.7 Opportunities for Strengthening Mentorship and Vocational Development

The evaluation identifies several opportunities for enhancing vocational impact. These include:

- structured pathways linking Djamu participants with AGNSW youth programs post-release
- gallery visits for young people transitioning back to community
- exhibitions featuring Djamu artworks
- mentorship pairing with Aboriginal artists in community
- TAFE-accredited units embedded in Djamu
- portable cultural portfolios for each participant
- digital platforms for youth to explore art careers
- community arts hubs partnering with Youth Justice

These opportunities were mentioned by both staff and young people. A young man expressed: *"If I could do art outside with real artists, I reckon I'd stay out of trouble." — John.* An AGNSW educator commented: *"There is enormous potential to build pathways from Djamu into the Gallery's youth programs." — Artist Mentor*. These findings reinforce the potential for Djamu to evolve into a holistic cultural and vocational pipeline.

7.8 Summary

The Djamu Youth Justice Program has created meaningful mentorship relationships and strong vocational interest among young participants. Young people consistently described Djamu practitioners as cultural mentors who modelled calmness, pride, discipline and creativity. These mentors played a crucial role in strengthening identity, emotional wellbeing and future orientation. Many young people described wanting to pursue art or cultural leadership after release, seeing themselves as capable of contributing positively to their communities.

While structural barriers currently limit the long-term impact of Djamu, and the breadth of vocational transitions available, our findings highlight that Djamu has positively impacts on aspiration, self-belief and creative identity. With further system-level support, Djamu has the potential to become a cornerstone of culturally grounded vocational development in NSW youth justice.

RQ4: Understanding the Diversity of Aboriginal Art and Culture

Research Question 4 examines whether the Djamu Youth Justice Program has improved participants' and educators' understanding and appreciation of the diversity, complexity and regional variation of Aboriginal art and culture across New South Wales. This question is central to Djamu's mission: the program was designed not merely to deliver art classes, but to expose young people—many of whom have been disconnected from their culture—to the breadth of Aboriginal artistic traditions, stories, materials and cultural knowledge systems.

The evaluation finds that young people and staff perceived Djamu to have increased cultural literacy. Young people described newfound pride, cultural curiosity and recognition of diversity within Aboriginal art. Staff highlighted their own growth in understanding cultural traditions, historical contexts, artistic lineages and differences across Nations. The program's

focus on south-eastern practices—particularly shield-making, carving styles, ochre application and local motifs—was widely considered a strength. This section details four interrelated findings:

1. increased cultural literacy among young people,
2. exposure to regional diversity and Nation-specific knowledge,
3. deeper understanding of cultural histories and protocols, and
4. strengthened cultural competence among staff and educators.

8.1 Increased Cultural Literacy Among Young People

Young people described learning cultural knowledge they had never been exposed to before. Many expressed surprise that Aboriginal art and culture varied so widely across NSW. One participant said: *"I thought all blackfellas had the same art. Didn't know our mobs had different ways." — Reece* Another stated: *"I didn't grow up with culture. Here, I'm learning the proper way." — Jace* These comments reflect the program's potential to fill cultural gaps created through colonisation, family disconnection and systemic disadvantage.

Staff confirmed this observation. An educator at Riverina noted: *"Djamu teaches them that our mobs aren't all one culture. That's a powerful thing for identity." — Danielle.* By learning about tools, carving forms, regional patterns and materials, young people are able to develop a more nuanced understanding of their cultural heritage—a core pillar of Indigenous wellbeing (Gee et al., 2014).

8.2 Exposure to Regional Diversity and Nation-Specific Knowledge

Related to the above, a distinctive strength of Djamu is its grounding in the south-eastern cultural traditions of New South Wales. Many young people had only encountered pan-Aboriginal motifs, often influenced by desert painting styles, which they saw in school or commercial art settings. Djamu deliberately introduced local traditions such as:

- shield designs from south-east regions,
- local motifs (e.g., concentric patterns, linework, kinship symbols),
- tree scar techniques,
- coastal and riverine art forms,
- mountain Country influences,
- materials used in NSW (gum tree, river stones, ochre).

Participants described this as eye-opening. One young man explained: *"I didn't even know our area had shields. I thought that was from up north." — John.* Another said: *"It makes me feel connected to where I'm from. Not someone else's culture." — Sergio*

This distinction is important. A recurring theme in Indigenous scholarship is that reclaiming local cultural knowledge enables place-based identity formation, which strengthens wellbeing and fosters social belonging (Martin, 2008; Wright et al., 2021). Djamu's south-eastern focus is promotes culturally restorative practices by enabling young people to learn about and immerse themselves in, the unique cultural elements of this region.

8.3 Understanding Cultural Histories and Protocols

Participation in Djamu was also associated with an improved understanding of cultural protocols, such as:

- respecting local stories,
- proper handling of cultural objects,
- significance of shields,
- gendered cultural knowledge,
- who has authority to teach particular traditions,
- restrictions on images, stories or motifs without permission.

Young people frequently referenced learning why certain symbols or stories must be approached with respect. For some, this was their first experience of structured cultural teaching. One participant shared: *"They taught us not to just draw anything. You gotta know what it means." — Nigel.* Another commented: *"Now I know why my Nan said not to muck around with culture." — Wally.* Staff expressed similar insights. A psychologist acknowledged: *"Djamu has taught me to slow down and understand cultural meaning behind the artwork. It's not just decorative." — Billy (Psychologist).*

8.4 Cultural Competence and Confidence for Staff

One of the strongest findings is that Djamu increased staff capacity and confidence in delivering or supporting cultural learning. Educators, Youth Officers and Justice Health staff consistently described gaining:

- knowledge of NSW cultural practices,
- confidence in discussing culture with young people,
- respect for local artistic traditions,
- greater cultural safety skills,
- understanding of how art supports emotional wellbeing.

Staff emphasised that Djamu provided them with practical knowledge they could apply in daily interactions. A Youth Officer stated: *"Before Djamu, I didn't know how to have cultural conversations. Now I feel more confident." — Emma (YO).* Similarly, an educator commented:
"I can use what I've learned from Djamu in my lessons. It helps me teach in a way that respects culture." — Danielle. Staff also highlighted increased cultural humility, recognising their gaps and learning how to work respectfully with young people.

This aligns with research showing that culturally grounded programs strengthen staff capability, enhance relational safety and improve engagement outcomes (Bamblett et al., 2019; Sarra, 2011).

8.5 Exposure to Culture as a Pathway to Identity Strengthening

Young people frequently described Djamu as reconnecting them to identity and pride:

"It makes me feel proud to be Aboriginal." — James

"I didn't know my culture before. Now I want to learn more when I get out." — Roy.

For many, Djamu was their first formal experience of cultural education. Several young people described wishing they had access to such learning earlier in life. As one participant put it: *"If I had this when I was younger, I might not be here." — Metto.* Collectively, these quotes reinforce that cultural identity can be an important protective factor for children and young people in conflict with the law against justice system involvement (Dudgeon et al., 2014).

8.6 Youth Curiosity and Self-Led Learning

A notable finding was the rise in cultural curiosity. Several staff and participants described young people asking questions, initiating discussions about their Country, tracing family connections, or re-learning aspects of their mob's history. One facilitator shared: *"The boys come back after class with questions about their family. That's a big shift." — Artist Mentor.*

A young person said: *"I wanna find out more about my Country now. I never cared before." — LJ.* This sense of curiosity is significant. Cultural curiosity is a precursor to cultural affirmation, which in turn supports emotional regulation, motivation, relational safety and pro-social behaviour (Ford et al. 2015; De Leersnyder J, 2013; Mauss and Butler, 2010; Renshaw, 2019).

8.7 Summary

The information presented in this section highlights that Djamu deepened young people's and staff's understanding of the richness and diversity of Aboriginal art and culture in New South Wales. Participants learned about Nation-specific cultural practices, regional artistic traditions, cultural protocols, materials and stories. Staff gained knowledge, confidence and cultural competence, enhancing their ability to support young people in culturally safe ways.

For the young people who completed the program, this appears to have been their first structured engagement with their cultural heritage. Djamu's teaching helped them connect with identity, build cultural pride and recognise themselves as part of a diverse and powerful cultural landscape. While these findings need to be tempered by the fact that only five young people completed the program, they nevertheless point to the potential that arts-based cultural programs can have in supporting young people's resilience through cultural immersion and increased cultural connection.

RQ5: How has the program encouraged educators and program staff to meaningfully engage young people with cultural material from within NSW on an ongoing basis?

Research Question 5 explores the effect of the Djamu Youth Justice Program on educators' and program staff's ability to meaningfully engage young people with cultural material, particularly from within New South Wales. This focus is crucial because meaningful cultural engagement in youth justice settings should be a core component of trauma-informed, culturally safe practice that has been shown to be a protective factor against re-offending for Aboriginal young people (Dudgeon et al., 2014; Gee et al., 2014).

The main theme identified in this section relates to a perceived increase in the cultural confidence of staff who had been exposed to Djamu. This was seen in several ways,

including through increased confidence and perceived competence to discuss culture in ways that felt safe, leading to a more proactive engagement with culture which strengthened relational approaches between staff and young people. These themes are discussed in more detail below.

9.1 Staff Describe Increased Cultural Confidence

Amongst staff who had been exposed to Djamu (n=16), many acknowledged that before the program they lacked confidence—or felt unqualified—to incorporate cultural material into lessons or conversations with young people. This is consistent with broader research indicating that non-Indigenous and system-based staff often fear "getting culture wrong" (Sarra, 2011), which can inhibit meaningful cultural engagement.

For example, a Riverina Educator explained that *"Before Djamu, I didn't know how to bring cultural topics into the classroom safely. Now I feel I have the tools." — Danielle.* This was echoed by a Youth Office who stated that, *"I know more now. I know what's from this area. I know what to ask without feeling awkward." — Emma.* One way that this appears to have occurred is through Djamu increasing cultural curiosity amongst staff. As one program staff member indicated, *"I've been reading about the local mobs since Djamu started. I want to get it right*" *– Jonah.*

Staff repeatedly emphasised that watching Djamu facilitators teach with respect, clarity and cultural authority helped them understand how to speak about culture in a relational way. This experiential learning appears to have assisted staff in engaging with culture in more meaningful ways, including through proactive conversations whereby *"I talk to the boys about where their mobs are from now. It's something I do regularly." — Danielle.* For some participants, reactive cultural engagement (only addressing culture when necessary) to proactive cultural practice (embedding culture as a normal, everyday topic). As one Youth Officer noted, *"I'll ask the boys about their artwork, about their Country. It opens them up." — Kevin.* This changed dynamic was also observed by young people. For example, Jace commented that *"Staff talk to us more about culture now. It's good that they're learning too."*

A repeated theme in the interviews was the improvement in relationships between staff and young people since Djamu began. Staff described the program as a "safe bridge" that allowed them to connect meaningfully with young people, indicating that:

"Djamu softens the room. They're calmer, more open. It lets us reach them more easily." — Luna (Psychologist)

"Djamu gives us something positive and cultural to talk about. It deepens our relationship." — Lynne

From the young people's perspective, they trusted staff more when they saw staff actively participating in cultural discussions.

One youth said:
"If staff respect our culture, we respect them more." — Billy-Bob

Another stated:
"When they learn about our culture, it makes them feel less like officers and more like people." — John

These strengthened relationships appeared to be due, at least in part, to an increase in the practical knowledge that staff had gained through the Djamu program, including:

- how to explain shields and their significance
- how to distinguish between regional art styles
- meaning behind linework, symbols and patterns
- how to speak respectfully about cultural objects
- histories of local Nations
- relationships between Country, stories and materials.

For some staff, increased practical knowledge of culture enabled deeper conversations with young people, which in turn, could be used to support behaviour and wellbeing. As one Youth Officer explained, *"If a boy is worked up, I'll bring up something he did in Djamu. It calms him down." — Emma.* This was reinforced by one of the psychologists, who noted that *"Djamu gives us a common language. Art becomes a grounding strategy." — Billy (Psychologist).* The power of Djamu – and the lessons that it taught young people and staff – was also reflected in how young people people's responses: *"I get less angry when we talk about art or culture. It distracts me good." — Reece*

9.2 Summary

For staff who had been exposed to Djamu our findings highlight the potential of this program to strengthen staff ability to meaningfully engage young people with cultural material from NSW. Educators, Youth Officers, Programs staff and psychologists all reported feeling more confident in talking about culture, and consequently in their ability to proactively engage with young people. This appears to have also led to deeper relational trust and greater understanding of regional Aboriginal cultures. Young people recognised and valued this shift, noting that it improved relationships and increased mutual respect.

RQ6: What support has the program offered to educators in developing skills in visual art education and confidence in delivering Aboriginal art content?

Research Question 6 investigates the extent to which the Djamu Youth Justice Program has strengthened the capacity of educators—including teachers, Youth Officers, Programs staff, psychologists and Justice Health workers—to deliver visual art education and Aboriginal cultural content confidently and safely. Four themes were identified:

1. Exposure to Djamu increased staff perceptions of competence in visual art teaching methods,
2. Staff reported strengthened cultural teaching capacity,
3. Staff perceived that Djamu improved their understanding of trauma-informed art practices, and
4. Staff reported gaining confidence integrating culture and creativity into everyday work.

10.1 Increased Staff Competence in Visual Art Teaching Methods

Staff consistently described learning new art techniques, materials and pedagogical approaches through their participation in Djamu. This was particularly meaningful for educators who had limited experience teaching art or lacked specialised training in arts education. A teacher at Riverina explained: *"Djamu has taught me how to structure an art lesson properly—step-by-step, with good modelling." — Danielle*. Several Youth Officers also identified learning specific art techniques from the facilitators. *"I learned how to shade, how to layer colours properly. I've used that with the boys." — Nathan (YO).* These changes indicate that Djamu provided staff with hands-on professional learning, which educators were able to directly apply in their own classrooms or group sessions. Staff also described increased willingness to integrate creative activities into their regular practice.

A Programs Worker said: *"Since Djamu, I've started using sketching and painting more in my sessions. The boys respond better when it's something they enjoy." — Lynne*. This aligns with research showing that creative learning environments improve engagement among justice-involved young people (Daykin et al., 2017).

10.2 Increased Capacity to Deliver Aboriginal Cultural Content

One of the program's strongest impacts on staff was increased confidence in delivering Aboriginal cultural content. Prior to Djamu, many staff expressed fear of misrepresenting cultural knowledge or "saying the wrong thing." A Youth Officer said: *"Before Djamu, I didn't feel comfortable teaching culture. Now I know what's from here, and I can talk to the boys properly." — Emma*. Djamu facilitators modelled:

- language and terminology,
- cultural humour,
- how to explain local motifs,
- how to handle cultural objects,
- respect for protocols,
- appropriate boundaries around men's and women's knowledge,
- how to answer questions with cultural humility.

A psychologist explained: *"I watched how the Djamu facilitators explained things. Now I know how to talk about culture respectfully without stepping out of line." — Luna*. This "modelling effect" was one of the program's most important contributions. It allowed staff to learn appropriate cultural teaching styles through observation and interaction. Staff described, Djamu as a culturally safe form of professional development. *"It's like on-the-job cultural training." — Jonah (Programs).*

Several staff reported that they felt an increased sense of confidence to run art or culture-based sessions even when Djamu facilitators are not present. A Programs Worker stated: *"If Djamu wasn't here that day, I could run something inspired by them now. I know what to do." — Lynne.* An educator shared: *"I've used Djamu-inspired activities in my classroom. The boys respond really well because it feels familiar." — Danielle. "We'd love a kit—a Djamu resource kit—for us to keep using." — Emma (YO).*

While this is an important impact of the program, caution needs to be exercised to ensure that non-Indigenous staff are not inappropriately 'teaching' culture to Aboriginal children. While

an increase in confidence amongst staff is positive, it needs to be tempered with an explicit acknowledgement that cultural knowledge is not something that non-Indigenous people can possess, let alone teach.

10.3 Increased Understanding of Trauma-Informed Art Practices

Another key theme was the impact Djamu had on staff understanding of trauma-informed practice through artmaking. Staff observed how art helped young people regulate emotions, stay focused and remain calm. One YO stated: *"When the boys are doing art, it's the quietest place in the whole centre." — Kevin.* Psychologists made similar observations: *"The art sessions reduce hyperarousal. You can see their bodies settle." — Billy (Psychologist).* The therapeutic potential of Djamu was clearly articulated by a psychologist who noted, "*art is therapeutic. Djamu helped us understand how to use it clinically." — Skyler*. Djamu therefore has the potential to improve trauma-informed and therapeutic practice beyond the 10-week program, by modelling the importance of relationally and culturally safe practices. This was observed in the way that educators and youth officers described changes not only in their teaching techniques, but also in their relational practices. A Youth Officer explained: *"Watching Djamu showed me you don't have to be loud to get respect." — Emma.* Another staff member said: *"Djamu brings a softness. I've learned to slow down and meet them where they're at." — Rae (Justice Health).* Young people also recognised and valued this shift. One participant described: *"Staff treat us better when they learn our culture. It feels different." — Reece.*

This learning is consistent with trauma-informed frameworks which identify creative modalities as highly effective for young people who struggle with verbal expression (Perry & Szalavitz, 2017; van der Kolk, 2015).

These relational adaptations reflect best-practice Indigenous pedagogy, which emphasises deep listening, non-verbal communication, relational reciprocity and whole-person wellbeing (Martin, 2008). This demonstrates that workforce development did not only improve staff knowledge—it improved the emotional climate of the centres. Through witnessing these changes, staff learned to:

- use visual art as a regulation tool,
- slow down their teaching pace,
- incorporate sensory activities,
- build safety through routine,
- reduce verbal overload,
- use visual communication to engage dysregulated youth.

Djamu influenced how staff:

- speak to young people,
- use humour and storytelling,
- create a calm environment,
- structure group dynamics,
- acknowledge cultural differences,
- listen more actively,
- affirm cultural identity,
- engage respectfully with emotional content.

The impact of Djamu on staff was also notable in the way staff reported an increased understanding of culture not as an 'extra', but as central to behaviour, learning and wellbeing for Aboriginal young people. A psychologist stated: *"Djamu showed us culture is therapeutic. It's not a luxury—it's essential." — Luna.* Similarly, a Youth Officer added: *"When they're doing culture, they're calm. When they're calm, everything works better." — Kevin.* This was echoed by educators, who similarly observed that *"Their school engagement improves after Djamu. They're more confident." — Danielle*. These perspectives align with a large body of literature demonstrating that cultural identity can strengthen resilience, emotional wellbeing and academic engagement (Dudgeon et al., 2014).

10.4 Summary

Our findings highlight that Djamu assisted staff to gain practical visual art teaching skills, deepened their cultural knowledge, increased their confidence delivering Aboriginal content, and contributed to a broader understanding of the importance of trauma-informed, culturally grounded practices. Educators, Youth Officers, psychologists and Justice Health staff identified instances where Djamu contributed to professional learning and daily practice, particularly by strengthening their relationships with young people.

RQ7: How has the program allowed participants to realise what would have been helpful to them pre-custody?

Research Question 7 explores whether participation in Djamu has enabled young people to identify the supports, cultural opportunities and relationships they needed **before** entering custody. This question is fundamentally about early intervention, cultural prevention, and insight into systemic gaps. In this way, RQ7 illuminates young people's retrospective wisdom—what they recognise could have redirected their pathways earlier in life. This perspective is increasingly valued in criminological scholarship, which acknowledges that justice-involved youth are often experts on their own unmet needs (McNeill, 2012).

11.1 Need for Safe Spaces Away from Violence, Drugs and Peer Pressure

Many young people emphasised that their home or community environments offered few safe spaces to escape harmful influences. They expressed that an arts-based cultural program—like Djamu—existing in their neighbourhood could have offered a protective alternative. One participant said: *"I was always on the streets. If there was a place like Djamu near us, I would've gone there instead." — John.* Another added: *"Home wasn't safe. Djamu gives you peace. If I had that when I was 10, things would be different." — Ashley.* Staff also highlighted this theme: *"The boys describe Djamu as a safe place. That's what they missed outside—safety and belonging." — Rae (Justice Health.* This aligns with Indigenous wellbeing literature describing the need for community-based "cultural sanctuaries" for young people (Barker et al., 2022).

11.2 School Disengagement and Missed Cultural Curriculum

Several participants mentioned school disengagement as a key factor in their early pathways into justice involvement. Many described feeling disconnected at school, misunderstood, or culturally invisible. One youth explained: *"School didn't feel like it was for me. We never did this kind of stuff. It was boring, nothing about our culture." — LJ.* Another stated: *"If school had culture like Djamu, I would have stayed longer." — Billy-Bob.* Educators

confirmed these reflections: *"Djamu shows us what school could have been for them—culturally rich, practical, hands-on, relational." — Danielle.*

11.3 Peer Influences and Lack of Cultural Identity Strengthening

Many young people described growing up in environments where negative peer influence—particularly from older neighbourhood boys—was more accessible than positive role models. One young man said: *"The older boys were my teachers. Not good teachers." — Wally*. Another added: *"We followed the wrong crowd because that's all there was." — Roy.* Through Djamu, participants came to realise that stronger cultural identity earlier in life might have helped them resist harmful influences. A youth articulated this insight powerfully: *"If I knew who I was earlier, I wouldn't have needed them [the wrong crowd] to feel like someone." — Sergio.* This reflects Indigenous identity literature emphasising that cultural grounding protects against negative peer affiliation (Dockery, 2020).

One of the most positive findings of RQ7 is that Djamu gave participants hope—not only for their future, but for an alternative past that felt imaginable. Young people could see that a different pathway had been possible. A youth reflected: *"This shows me I'm not dumb. I had skills. Just no one to show me how to use them." — Bob*. Another stated: *"Djamu opened my eyes. I could've done this stuff outside." — Skye.* Staff observed similar transformations: *"Djamu helps them imagine an alternative life. That's powerful for behaviour change." — Billy (Psychologist).*

11.4 Summary

Our findings highlight that Djamu allowed young people to articulate, often for the first time, what they needed *before* coming into custody—cultural grounding, positive mentors, therapeutic tools, safe spaces, supportive schools, and stronger identity. While only a small number of children completed Djamu, they nevertheless consistently identified that:

- *early cultural programs could have prevented their offending.*
- *earlier mentorship would have provided guidance and stability.*
- *art could have been a coping mechanism for trauma.*
- *they lacked culturally safe environments outside custody.*
- *schools failed to engage them in culturally meaningful ways.*

Djamu, by offering these elements inside custody, makes visible the absence of such supports earlier in life, and the pervasive impacts of systemic racism and exclusion that shape the early pathways for Aboriginal young people.

12. System Barriers of Djamu

Despite the program's strengths, several systemic barriers undermine its impact. These barriers sit at the intersection of structural racism, resource limitations, operational inflexibility, and workforce instability.

12.1 The overarching impact of structural and systemic racism

The impact of structural racism, particularly within youth justice, was raised by multiple participants, both as a barrier but also as an example of how cultural programs can provide

safety to mitigate against the impacts of structural racism. For example, many young people spoke explicitly about racism in their experiences with police, school discipline, and custodial authority. Nigel (Riverina) described feeling "*judged already just walking in."* Staff validated this, noting that systemic racism shapes expectations and outcomes for Aboriginal youth. A staff member at Reiby stated, "*The system punishes trauma behaviours as if they're deliberate."*

Some of these harms were perceived to be mitigated by Djamu through its focus on relationships, cultural guidance and the 'non-authority' based care that staff provided. Young people and staff spoke at length about the importance of trusted adults who are not custodial staff (artists, educators and gallery staff) who can offer a consistent presence, warmth, genuine care and concern, and who reject the deficit narrative that is drawn upon to understand children and young people in conflict with the law (Hannah-Moffat, 2016). As Art Gallery staff noted:

"Having people that come in and care about you and your wellbeing can be life changing" (AGNSW 3).

"If you're with the young men for a year or two years, then they develop that trust… you feel like a bit of a family" (AGNSW 2)

Nevertheless, as the next section highlights, Djamu exists within a broader ecology that emphasises control, security and 'good order'. The youth justice system itself emerged as a significant barrier to the effective delivery of Djamu in a way that is consistent with its core principles.

12.2 The context of youth justice: Environments, workforce turnover and capability gaps

Interviews with Art Gallery staff highlighted some of the challenges of providing arts-based programs within custodial settings. Participants noted that youth justice is *"it's own world"* bound by rules, security protocols and constraints that create a high level of unpredictability. Youth justice protocols that focus on security and good order can seriously undermine the impacts of programs, particularly those that are premised on deep relationality and consistency. As participants noted:

"It's a very structured environment to work in… you have to be very prepared and structured and clear on your intention for going there… there's sometimes a lot of interruptions which can affect the program, with different staff kind of coming and going" (AGNSW 1).

High turnover of Youth Officers, program staff, and teachers reduces continuity and prevents centres from embedding cultural literacy into practice. Staff described being "stretched thin," "pulled in five directions," and "unable to maintain momentum." Young people reported inconsistency in approaches: "*One week you get someone who's deadly. Next week you get someone who talks down to you"* (Roy, Riverina). This was echoed by other staff, who noted that *"sometimes the staff are not great as well, the non-Indigenous staff… they don't see the value of the program as much as we might do"* (AGNSW 2).

Similarly, locked-down units, staff shortages, education cancellations, and competing operational priorities regularly interrupt cultural programs. These interruptions undermine trust, continuity, and therapeutic momentum. Young people expressed frustration, stating:

"*They shut it down for nothing. Always something. We lose our groove" (*Kevin, Frank Baxter).

Consistent delivery of a program like Djamu, therefore, requires specialist capabilities among staff running the program, as well as the ability to adapt under uncertain circumstances. This was highlighted by Art Gallery staff, who noted that *"there's rules around what you can bring… but it also means we can be creative in how we plan the programs"* (AGNSW 1).

Djamu works best where delivery is stable, uninterrupted, and logistically supported by centre operations. Where staff turnover, lockdowns, or conflicting schedules disrupt the program, engagement drops sharply. This aligns with broader research indicating that program continuity is critical to sustained behavioural change (Weatherburn & Holmes, 2023). As such, delivering youth justice programs that are grounded on relationality cannot be viewed as a simple extension of general arts or community programming, but rather, requires an understanding of the unique youth justice centre environments, and the experiences that have shaped the lives of the young people who participate in these programs.

12.3 Lack of throughcare and re-entry infrastructure

Young people overwhelmingly reported fear and uncertainty about life after release. As Trey (Frank Baxter) explained: *"Inside they help us calm down, but outside is where it hits you."* Staff consistently identified gaps in:

- community cultural mentors
- safe transport
- housing
- employment pathways
- ongoing art and cultural programs
- coordinated aftercare.

These structural issues can have a detrimental effect on programs like Djamu that require continuity over time to enable the development of safety and trust with young people. Without cultural continuity during re-entry, gains made through Djamu risk being lost. This was reinforced by staff who contrasted sustained engagement with short-term contact, noting that time enables trust and confidence to build and for leadership skills to develop. When this is not supported, either because young people are cycling through multiple episodes of remand, or there is limited infrastructure to support throughcare and re-entry, relationality becomes compromised. As one Art Gallery participant stated, *"we were able to build that connection [over] the last two years, three years"* (AGNSW 1), further highlighting the importance of continuity.

12.4 Program governance and system infrastructure

The overall governance of the Djamu Youth Justice program was also raised as an area that requires further attention. There was concern amongst some participants that the program has structural vulnerabilities, particularly in relation to record keeping, knowledge transmission within the program, and a reliance on individuals rather than the institution, which can create challenges when staff leave. As one participant noted:

> *"There's a lot of great work that's happened, but [I] haven't really seen that system and structure that you'd like to see…So I think it can be run a lot more smoother… so that it doesn't rely on any individuals and it sits within the organisation."* (AGNSW 3)

While not a major theme in the analysis, it is an important issue to consider ensuring Djamu's sustainability and possible growth.

PART IV — DISCUSSION, RECOMMENDATIONS AND FUTURE

13. Integrated Thematic Synthesis: Discussion and implications

The results of this evaluation point to the positive potential of the Djamu Youth Justice Program to provide First Nations young people in custody with meaningful opportunities for cultural connection and strengthening. Participants emphasised the Djamu works because it operates as a uniquely effective cultural intervention within the NSW Youth Justice system engaging young people at levels that conventional programs rarely reach. Our findings are strengthened by the convergence of staff accounts and youth narratives, which points to the credibility of the thematic analysis presented in the previous sections.

The core mechanism that makes the program work can be understood across four interconnected domains: cultural authority**,** relational trust**,** identity pathways**,** and program stability. Across every site, young people and staff described Djamu as legitimate because it is led by Aboriginal artists, educators, and cultural practitioners. This legitimacy differentiates Djamu from programs perceived as "tick-a-box" or primarily compliance-driven. This cultural authority is a central mechanism that facilitates engagement and the development of trust. This is consistent with international literature which has shown that Indigenous-led cultural programming supports identity strengthening and emotional regulation (Sun et al., 2022; Martinez, 2021). This cultural authority supports youth to engage with the program.

In this section we provide an integrated synthesis that draws together the key findings of the evaluation, 'what works' and conclude with some implications for policy and practice.

13.1 System Failure as Backdrop: Why the Program Feels So Transformative

The results of this evaluation need to be contextualised against a broader system that creates and perpetuates trauma. Research has consistently shown that young people in contact with youth justice systems have experienced a broad range of systemic harms, including racism, ableism, school exclusions, over-policing and harassment, over-incarceration, child protection intervention, unstable housing, and exposure to community violence (see for example, Day, 2025; Kim & Cheng, 2025; Malvaso et al., 2022; Malvaso, Delfabbro & Day, 2016). These experiences are fuelled within social and structural systems that actively harm the very people who have been forced into margalinised positions (Cunneen, 2019; Roach, 2022). Participants in this evaluation consistently echoed these experiences, noting that institutional systems only ever intervene after significant harm has occurred, not beforehand. One of the most powerful insights from the integrated analysis is that Djamu is providing forms of cultural safety, emotional regulation, mentorship, structure, belonging, identity and hope that should have been present in participants' lives long before they arrived in custody.

In this context, Djamu feels transformative partly because, for many participants, it is the first time they have experienced consistency, calm adults, cultural belonging, positive expectations and a safe emotional environment. Young people contrasted the predictable, respectful atmosphere of Djamu with the chaos of their previous schooling, home and community experiences. Djamu therefore appears to be attempting to repair deficits and harms that are the responsibility of broader social, educational, health and child protection systems. Its impact highlights not only what is possible but also what has been missing.

13.2 Culture as the Central Stabilising Force Across All Themes

At the core of the findings presented throughout this report is that culture should not be viewed as an isolated component of the program but as the central stabilising force in participants' lives. Culture anchor's identity development, supports healing and relational safety, underpins peer belonging, offers protection against racism and systemic harm, shapes emotional processing and hope, nurtures leadership formation and infuses the metaphors that young people use to make sense of their lives. Across interviews, young people consistently reflected that earlier access to culture, artmaking, mentorship, Elders, structured programs and safe spaces could have redirected their lives. In this context, Djamu should be viewed as an opportunity to support First Nations children to build on their strengths through cultural immersion and connection. Young people's perspectives were reinforced by staff, who noted that participation in Djamu enabled young people to recognise lost opportunities and image alternative pathways.

The transformative potential of Djamu – and other cultural programs – is an important finding, but it needs to be contextualised against the barriers that exist within carceral systems that limit the impact of these 'transformational' opportunities. The limited reach of Djamu, which at the time of the evaluation was only being offered in one centre, the high number of children and young people experienced repeated cycles of custody, including remand, and the operational requirements of custodial settings can all negatively impact the way that Djamu is able to provide the type of safety that is needed to support meaningful and long-lasting change.

13.3 Healing, Trust and Emotional Regulation

Research has consistently shown that children and young people in youth justice settings have experienced significant trauma throughout their lives (Baumle, 2018; Desai, 2019; Malvasso et al., 2022; Reid & Loughran, 2021). Early and chronic exposure to trauma, including developmental trauma, structural and systemic racism has a pervasive impact on children's neurodevelopment by disrupting their ability to regulate emotions and behaviours through chronic activation of the flight/fight/freeze response (Farnfield & Onions, 2021; Spinazzola et al., 2018). While this dysregulation is typically framed as a 'risk' or a deficit, it reflects an adaptive response to a lack of safety (van der Kolk, 2014).

One of the key findings of this evaluation is that the young people who engaged with Djamu described it as calming, grounding and emotionally stabilising, highlighting its potential to assist with emotional and behavioural regulation. Young people reported that artmaking offered them a new tool for emotional regulation, something they had not been taught before custody. They also repeatedly described Djamu facilitators as people they could trust. Trust-building is a known predictor of program success in youth justice settings (Day et al., 2023; Tauri, 2022), and the Djamu program appears to positively contribute to this process because relationships are not experienced as coercive, punitive or directly tied to discipline. That trust allows deeper emotional expression, such as disclosure of grief, shame and fear, which is an important adjunct to behavioural change.

The therapeutic potential of Djamu was supported by staff perspectives that emphasised how Djamu has contributed to a calmer environment. This pattern aligns with trauma theory, which emphasises sensory, creative, relational and embodied practices as central to trauma healing (Perry & Szalavitz, 2017; van der Kolk, 2014). While this evaluation was not able to

test these relationships directly, the calming effect of Djamu was noted by multiple participants across interviews. Specifically, our findings suggest that art-based cultural programs that can meaningfully engage young people over longer period of time may provide opportunities to model and teach self-regulation, which in turn may have flow on effects to other areas of their lives. This is an area that requires further research to explore the mechanisms through which Djamu may impact young people's ability to self-regulate, and whether these changes are sustained post-program.

The potential of Djamu to contribute to young people's self-regulation may be seen in other findings reported in this evaluation, particularly the way that young people perceived the program as offering an alternative to more traditional peer and custodial hierarchies grounded in masculinities associated with violence and 'toughness'. For example, instead of competing to prove toughness or dominance, some young people described striving to demonstrate skill, concentration, creativity and patience. Given the established link between 'antisocial peers' and youth offending (Brewer et al, 2020) this may be an important finding that also warrants further exploration. For the young people who participated in Djamu, the program appeared to offer an alternative social model where cultural skill, creative focus and mutual encouragement carried more status than aggression or bravado. Importantly, Djamu does not replicate punitive or institutional hierarchies. Instead, it enables a form of "brotherhood" built on creativity, culture and shared vulnerability where young people learn to praise each other's work, assist with designs and share materials. This can contrast sharply with the competitive and guarded interactions that often characterise unit life.

Djamu may also be able to positive impact young people's sense of identity. This was observed in our data through the powerful metaphors young people use to describe their journeys, such as fences disappearing, shields protecting them, lost paths and new paths, broken tools being repaired, "calming the storm" and "finding where I belong." These metaphors reveal how young people understand the causes and patterns of harm in their lives. A metaphor such as "broken tools being repaired" may signals an awareness, for example, that earlier supports were inadequate or misused, and that new skills are being constructed. These metaphors provide a conceptual language for understanding transformation that sits alongside, and sometimes goes beyond, clinical or behavioural descriptions. They allow young people to narrate change in ways that resonate with culture, story and emotion.

13.4 Mentorship and Emerging Leadership: The Seeds of Self-Determination

The impact of positive mentorship on young people's sense of pride, achievement and as a pathway towards leadership were also important themes identified through this evaluation. Research on the important role of mentors for young people either at risk of criminal legal system involvement, or already entrenched in youth justice, demonstrates that under the right circumstances, mentors can play a significant role in young people's lives (see for example, Tolan et al., 2014). While there is limited research examining the specific impact of cultural mentors on young people in youth justice in Australia, as noted above, cultural grounding is central to understanding the positive impacts of Djamu, and this presumably extends to the cultural mentorship provided by the Djamu artists.

An important theme that emerged in our analysis is the potential for Djamu to contribute to an emerging sense of leadership among young people who experience success and pride in the program. Some participants began assisting others with designs, showing peers how to mix ochre or carve patterns; others encouraged reluctant boys to join sessions; and some

described wanting to teach culture to children in their own communities in the future. This emerging leadership aligns with Indigenous self-determination frameworks, which emphasise growing the next generation of cultural leaders and decision-makers (Dudgeon et al., 2014).

14. Implications

The Djamu Youth Justice Program demonstrates that culturally grounded artmaking, led by Aboriginal artists and Elders, can create meaningful change within custodial environments. Across five Youth Justice NSW centres, young people consistently described Djamu as a rare space where they felt seen, respected, and able to express who they are outside the confines of their offending histories. For many participants, Djamu was experienced as "the only program that feels like us," a place in which cultural pride, self-worth, and hope for the future could be safely explored. Staff observed improvements in behaviour, communication, and emotional regulation. Artists and Elders described Djamu as a vehicle for restoring cultural narratives that counter deficit-based representations of Aboriginal young people.

There are several implications from this evaluation, particularly for Youth Justice NSW policy and practice.

> First, cultural programming such as Djamu should be recognised as core, not peripheral to effective youth justice responses, where cultural connection, identity strengthening and relational safety are understood as important drivers of behavioural change, emotional regulation, and engagement with education and case plans (Day, A., & Malvaso, C. 2025). This, however, requires structural support, including access to suitable spaces, stable scheduling, appropriate resourcing, and recognition of Elders', artists' and cultural expertise (Holden, 2023).
>
> Second, custodial environments need to be actively reshaped to reduce the dominance of the concrete and to make room for Country within the limits of security. This can be achieved with small but meaningful changes, such as allowing more outdoor sessions, incorporating natural elements into program spaces, and displaying artwork that reflects local Country.
>
> Third, Djamu presents a template for how Youth Justice NSW can strengthen cultural capability and reflective practice among staff. Formalising these opportunities through professional learning, reflective supervision, and cross-cultural training linked to Djamu may have wide ranging positive impacts for all staff.

For AGNSW and other cultural partners, the evaluation underscores the importance of long-term, relational commitments to justice-involved young people. Djamu demonstrates that galleries and cultural institutions can play a critical role in justice reform when they:

- Treat young people as artists and cultural producers, not only as service users.
- Engage Elders, communities, and ACCOs in program design and governance.
- Build pathways that connect in-custody programs to post-release opportunities, including exhibitions, mentoring, and training.

The evaluation also suggests that AGNSW can use Djamu as a catalyst for broader institutional change, embedding relationships with justice-affected communities into core programming, collections, and outreach strategies.

15. Recommendations

Based on the evaluation, the following recommendations are proposed:

1. **Sustain and expand Djamu across Youth Justice NSW.**

   Maintain Djamu as a core program and explore expansion to all centres and relevant community settings, with stable funding and long-term partnerships. This should include integrating baseline funding into annual budgets for long-term sustainability.

2. **Strengthen Elders' and artists' roles and conditions.**

   Counited recognition of Elders and cultural practitioners as key knowledge holders, through appropriate and consistent remuneration, additionally build appropriate governance roles, and wellbeing supports, acknowledging the emotional labour involved.

3. **Embed Djamu within a whole-of-centre cultural strategy.**

   Continue to integrate Djamu with education, case management, and transition planning so that cultural insights inform behaviour support, risk assessment, and release planning.

4. **Continue to develop and expand community-based and throughcare Djamu pathways.**

   Work with ACCOs, schools, youth services, and cultural organisations to entrench and expand already existing Djamu-inspired programs in community, including pre-court and diversionary settings. Extend post-release peer-mentoring, extending leadership through-care, backed by evidence.

5. **Invest in workforce development linked to Djamu.**

   Use Djamu as a platform for staff learning in cultural safety, trauma-aware and healing-informed practice, and relational approaches to behaviour and risk.

6. **Monitor and evaluate longitudinal outcomes.**

   For AGNSW to develop on their processes for monitoring. Build on this evaluation through consistent recordings and longitudinal tracking of the program as a whole, and on an individual level, identity, post-release engagement, cultural connection, education and employment pathways, and justice system contact.

7. **Strengthen masculinities through culture.**

   Embed continuity, resource mentors and peer leadership, and integrate a masculinities-aware healing lens into case planning, behaviour support, and transitions.

By adopting these recommendations particularly, the investment of the program and dedicated cultural workforce the Department has the opportunity to lead the way through healing lens and fulfil its commitment to Closing the Gap when it comes to reducing youth detention rates. At the heart of this evaluation are the voices of the young people who for the first time felt seen and heard within the walls of the detention centre. These recommendations provide a road map and future guidance to ensure the cultural teachings are not just a temporary experience but a permanent and consistent foundation. This is essential to move from a model of containment to one of cultural empowerment by ensuring the program remains, expands and thrives.

16. Future Directions

Djamu shows what is possible when Aboriginal cultural authority, creative practice, and relational ethics are taken seriously within youth justice. Future work should focus on sustaining and extending the positive impacts reported by participants beyond the walls of custody. This could include co-designing community-based Djamu models with ACCOs and families, strengthening post-release connections to cultural mentors and institutions, and embedding Djamu's principles into broader youth justice reforms. Despite the small number of young people who had completed the Djamu program, the evaluation reinforces that when authentic cultural role models engage with young people to build trust and safety, young people respond positively. When Aboriginal knowledge, art, and leadership are centred, young people are more able to imagine lives beyond the justice system.

Closing Remarks

Djamu is a cultural program operating inside a system that is, by design and by history, profoundly unbalanced. Across this evaluation, young people and staff consistently reminded us that the "justice" environment is not neutral: it is shaped by racialised patterns of supervision and detention, by disrupted family and community connections, and by institutional routines that can amplify stress, distrust and dysregulation. Against that backdrop, the significance of Djamu is not that it "engages" young people in the ordinary sense. It is that it introduces a different organising logic—one grounded in cultural authority, relational safety, and the restoration of identity.

The central theme that emerged across all research questions—Culture → Identity → Rehabilitation—is not simply a conceptual model. It is a lived sequence that participants described in their own words, often with striking clarity. Young people repeatedly explained that when culture is present, the internal conditions for change become possible: the body settles, the mind slows, the guard drops, and connection becomes thinkable. **"**When I feel connected, I don't feel like smashing things up. I feel normal**,"** Bob reflected. That "normal" is not trivial; it signals an experience of safety, belonging and self-worth that many participants described as rare—inside custody and often long before custody.

Staff accounts echoed the same mechanism, emphasising that cultural grounding functions as the first stabiliser, not an optional extra. As Billy (Psychologist) observed, **"**Djamu stabilises them emotionally first. Only after that can therapy or schooling work properly**."** This insight is humbling because it reframes what the system often treats as "behaviour management" into what young people and staff described as a question of safety, regulation, and relational integrity. Djamu does not replace education, counselling, casework or health care—but it appears to create the conditions in which those supports can land.

The findings also underscore that Djamu's impact is inseparable from *who delivers it* and *how it is delivered*. Young people did not describe the program as "an activity"; they described it as a relationship—built through yarning, deep listening, cultural legitimacy, and consistent respect. **"**I don't trust many staff in here, but I trust the Djamu mob. They actually listen**,"** Trey said. That trust is not merely a positive sentiment; it is a rehabilitative asset. It is the bridge between guardedness and openness, between hypervigilance and reflection, between institutional control and self-direction.

Djamu shows what becomes possible when young men who have been shaped by a colonial–carceral infrastructure of surveillance and misrecognition are met instead with cultural authority, relational safety, and genuine recognition. In spaces that routinely reward hardness, Djamu made room for another kind of strength—patience, pride, creativity, and care. Young people described the impact in plain terms: "When I feel connected, I don't feel like smashing things up. I feel normal." — Bob. Staff saw the mechanism: "Djamu stabilises them emotionally first. Only after that can therapy or schooling work properly." — Billy (Psychologist**)**. These are not small outcomes inside detention; they are glimpses of a different future logic—one where culture anchors identity, identity enables regulation, and regulation opens a pathway to rehabilitation. The significance of Djamu is therefore both humbling and demanding, it demonstrates that many of the capacities young men are blamed for lacking—calm, respect, focus, hope—can emerge quickly when systems stop producing deficit and start producing belonging.

At its best, Djamu also reintroduces young people to futures they can imagine. Some spoke about art as "a language" when words were too exposed**— "**I can talk through the painting. I don't have to say it out loud**,"** Elliot explained. Others described vocational interest, leadership and cultural responsibility emerging in small but meaningful ways: running an acknowledgement, guiding peers, staying focused, wanting to keep making on the outside. These shifts are not guaranteed outcomes, and they are constrained by the realities of remand churn, lockdowns, workforce turnover and thin throughcare. Yet they matter because they show what can grow when cultural pride is treated as a foundation rather than a reward.

This evaluation also makes visible a difficult truth: Djamu feels transformative partly because it is providing—inside custody—elements that should have been available earlier and sustained outside. Young people were often explicit: **"**If I had this when I was younger, I might not be here**,"** Metto said. That is both an endorsement of the program and an indictment of the systems that failed to provide cultural safety, positive mentors, engaging schooling and stable supports before legal intervention. In this sense, Djamu does more than deliver culture in custody—it reveals the absence of culturally grounded infrastructure in communities, schools, and service systems that claim to support Aboriginal children.

The work ahead is therefore not just to "keep Djamu going," but to reimagine its place in a wider ecology of care. Djamu points to a youth justice future where culture is not peripheral, where Country is not abstract, where artists and Elders are recognised as essential practitioners, and where identity-strengthening is understood as practical rehabilitation. If we take the findings seriously, the question becomes: what would it mean for youth justice to be organised around the conditions Djamu creates—calm, respect, belonging, and cultural continuity—rather than around interruption, scarcity and control?

Djamu shows what is possible when Aboriginal cultural authority enters the room and stays long enough for trust to form. It is significant because it shifts the emotional climate, the

relational possibilities, and the stories young people can talk about themselves. It is humbling because it reminds us that culture is not a "program element," but a stabilising force—one that many young people have been denied. And it is re-envisioning because it offers a credible direction for reform: build systems where cultural connection is early, continuous, community-held, and treated as essential to wellbeing—so that fewer young people ever need to find culture for the first time behind a locked door.

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APPENDIX

17.1 Case Studies Introduction: Stories as Evidence, Not Anecdotes

The Djamu Youth Justice evaluation has, to this point, presented findings at a program and system level: Research Questions have been answered, themes have been identified, and system-level implications have been outlined. Yet much of Djamu's impact is most clearly understood through the individual stories of the young people who participated in the program. This section presents a curated set of case studies that bring the data to life, illustrating how culture, artmaking and relational safety operate in the lives of particular young people across different Youth Justice NSW centres.

Each profile has been selected because it exemplifies key themes identified across the broader dataset, while also revealing the nuance and complexity of individual experience. The young people represented here—including Elliot (Cobham), Ashley (Reiby), Jace (Riverina), James (Cobham), Bob (Reiby), Trey (Frank Baxter), and Sparky (Orana)—offer insight into the diversity of pathways into custody, forms of engagement with Djamu and possibilities for change. Pseudonyms are used throughout, and individual details have been de-identified to protect privacy and confidentiality.

The case studies serve three purposes. First, they illustrate how the theoretical and thematic frameworks play out in the lives of real young people. Second, they highlight variation between individuals and centres, showing that Djamu's impact is shaped by context, personal histories and relationships. Third, they function as narrative evidence: they demonstrate that the statistical over-representation of Aboriginal young people in custody is rooted in stories of trauma, resilience, structural harm and cultural strength, rather than abstract risk factors alone.

17.2 Methodological Note on Case Study Construction

Each case study has been constructed from a combination of in-depth interviews, observational notes from Djamu sessions, staff interviews and, where relevant, visual analysis of the artworks created by the young person. Interviews were semi-structured and guided by an Indigenous Research Methodologies approach, privileging yarning, story, relational context and participant agency (Chilisa, 2012; Smith, 2012; Wilson, 2008). Young people were invited to reflect on their life before custody, their experiences within Youth Justice, their engagement with Djamu, and their hopes and concerns for the future.

The research team treated each young person as an expert on their own life. As one participant said, *"No one ever asks us properly. They just write stuff about us"* (Sparky). The case study method aims to respond to that critique by centring youth voices and respecting the relational context in which stories were shared. Staff perspectives are included where they illuminate program dynamics or provide corroboration, but they do not override participant accounts.

Each case study has been structured around four core dimensions:

1. **Context and background** – including family, schooling, community and system contact.
2. **Engagement with Djamu** – including initial reactions, relationships with facilitators and peers, and key turning points.
3. **Artworks and symbolism** – focusing on the shield or major pieces produced and their meanings for the young person.
4. **Outcomes and reflections** – including emotional shifts, behavioural changes, insights about pre-custody needs and future aspirations.

This structure allows each narrative to mirror the evaluation's core theoretical strands: cultural identity, trauma and healing, desistance, and creative practice. Please refer to the main body of the report for a more detailed description of these themes.

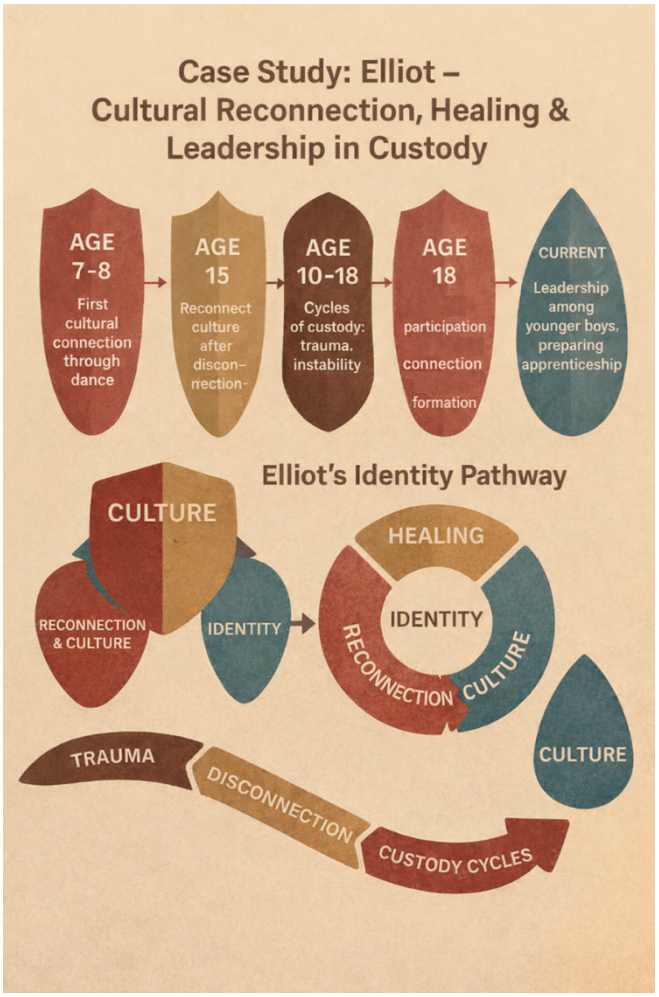
17.3 Illustrative Case Vignettes

Rather than re-presenting each full case study in this section, the following short vignettes summarise how individual stories illustrate the broader evaluation findings.

17.3.1 Elliot (Cobham): From volatility to focused calm

When Elliot first encountered Djamu, staff described him as quick-tempered and frequently involved in "code blues." He reported high levels of anger and anxiety, linked to a history of family instability and loss. In his first sessions, he was restless, sceptical and dismissive of his own abilities. Over several weeks, however, Elliot developed a strong relationship with the Djamu artist, who engaged him through humour, gentle challenge and affirmation.

Elliot's shield evolved into a complex composition featuring a shark, concentric patterns and protective layers. He said, *"I can talk through the painting. I don't have to say it out loud"* (Elliot). Staff observed that he became more settled, spent longer in class without incident and began using art as a coping strategy when upset. He later reflected that if he had access to a program like Djamu earlier, he might have avoided some of his charges: *"If I knew this stuff before, I wouldn't have lost it so much"* (Elliot). His story demonstrates the intersection of trauma, emotional regulation and identity change.



17.3.1 Ashley (Reiby): Reclaiming voice and agency

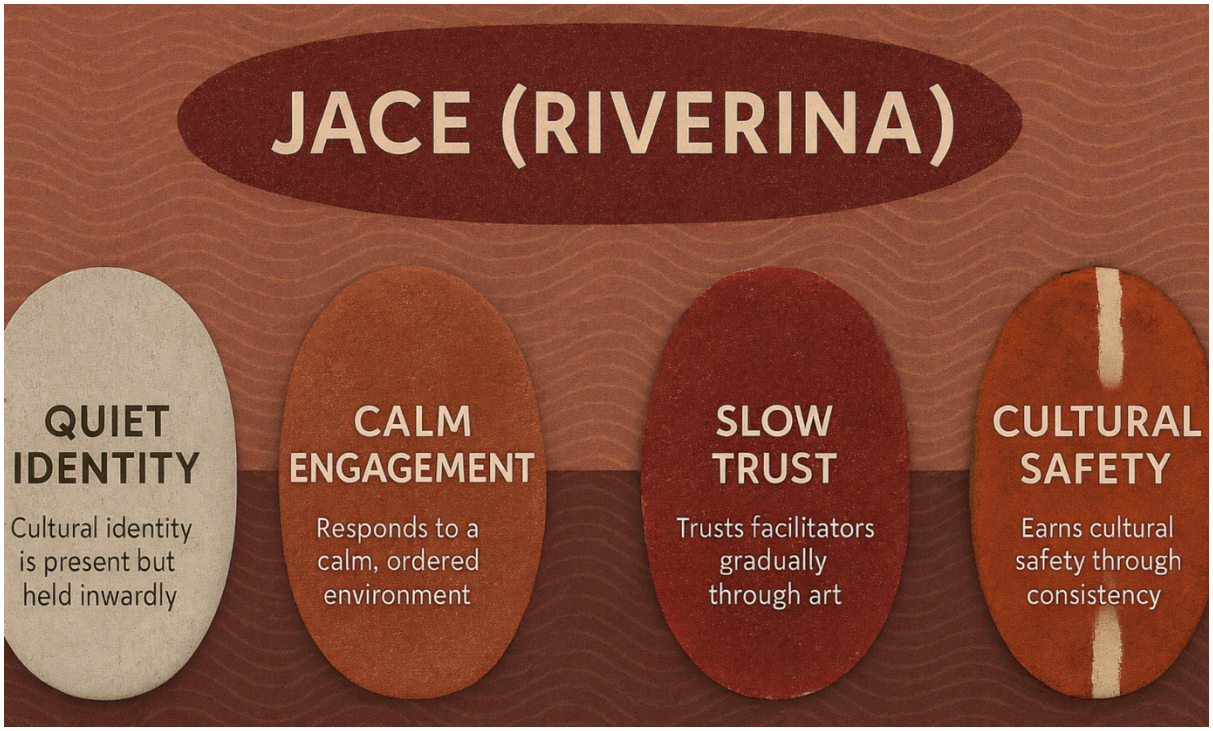
Ashley's story illustrates the gendered dimensions of Djamu's impact. She described growing up with significant caring responsibilities and exposure to adult problems at a young age. By the time she reached Reiby, she was exhausted, angry and distrustful of professionals. Djamu offered a rare space in which she felt heard and accepted. She stated, *"In Djamu I can actually breathe. No one's barking orders at you"* (Ashley).

Her shield portrayed hands emerging from turbulent water, reaching toward a sun framed by shields and family symbols. She interpreted it as representing "not drowning in other people's problems anymore." Through Djamu, Ashley articulated clear views about what she needed pre-custody: stable support, safe housing, a mentor and earlier access to trauma-informed therapy. Her case underscores the importance of designing cultural programs that are responsive to the experiences of Aboriginal girls and young women in custody.

17.3.2 Jace (Riverina): Culture as anchor and leadership spark

Jace entered Riverina with a history of school exclusion and a strong sense of being "written off." In interviews, he described Djamu as the first program that made him feel "smart in a different way." He stated, *"I feel like I've got roots now. Like I'm from somewhere"* (Jace). His shield depicted his river Country, kinship symbols and a path winding toward a meeting place.

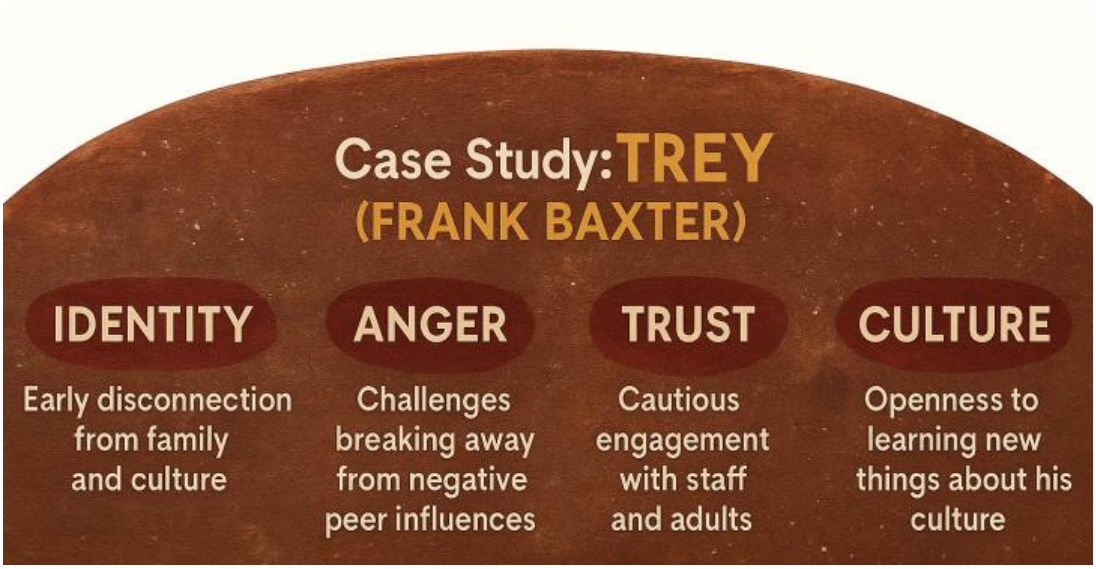
As his skills and confidence grew, Jace began assisting peers with designs and explaining the cultural significance of his motifs. Staff observed him de-escalating conflicts in the unit and encouraging others to participate: *"Come on, bro, just give it a crack,"* they recalled him saying. Jace's narrative highlights how cultural pride can translate into prosocial leadership and how Djamu can reframe a young person's identity from "troublemaker" to "teacher."

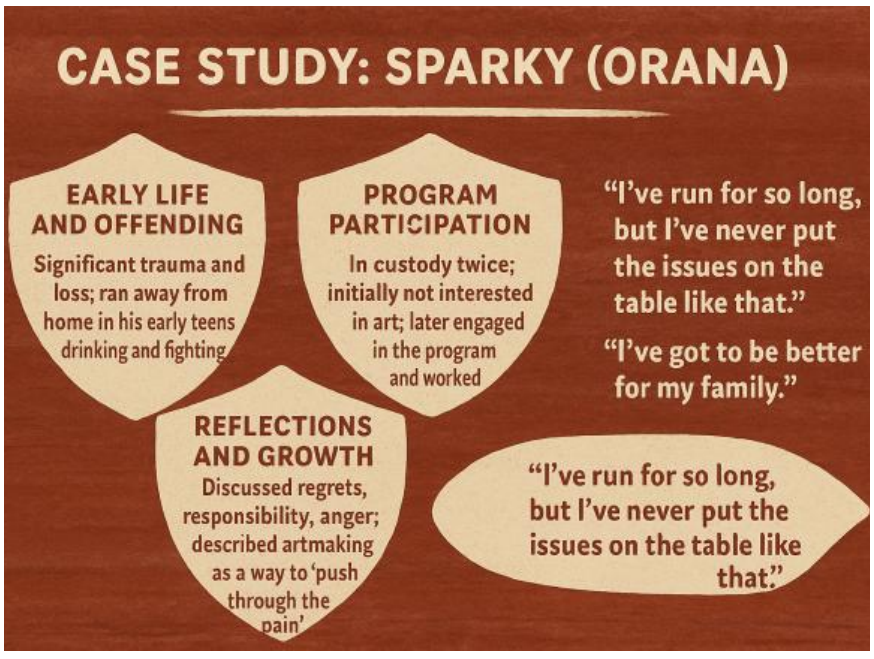


17.3.3 Trey (Frank Baxter) and Sparky (Orana): Humour, insight and responsibility

Trey and Sparky provide examples of young people who used humour as both a coping mechanism and a relational tool. Initially known for disruptive behaviour, both used Djamu sessions as a space to test boundaries in a safer way. Over time, they developed strong relationships with facilitators and staff, who recognised the intelligence and insight behind their joking personas.

Trey described Djamu as "*the only place where I don't feel like a criminal,"* adding, *"When I'm painting, I feel like someone I want to be"* (Trey). Sparky reflected on his responsibility to younger cousins and younger boys in custody, stating, *"I don't want them ending up like me. I want to show them better"* (Sparky). Their stories illustrate how humour, when met with relational safety and cultural affirmation, can evolve into self-reflection and responsibility.





18. Staff Case Studies

18.1 Introduction to Staff Case Studies

While youth narratives reveal Djamu's transformative impact at a personal and cultural level, staff interviews demonstrate how the program reshapes the professional, relational and cultural environment within Youth Justice NSW (YJNSW). Staff repeatedly described Djamu as "the safest program in the centre," "a model for how we should all work," and "the cultural anchor that changes everything."

The following case studies highlight the perspectives of four groups of staff: Amanda, an Aboriginal Education Officer (AEO) at Riverina; Luna, Skyler and Billy, psychologists at Reiby; Lynne and Jonah, programs officers at Riverina; and Emma, Kevin and Nathan, Youth Officers at Orana. Each profile draws on interview transcripts and observational notes.

18.1.1 Staff Case Study 1 — Amanda (AEO, Riverina)

"*They finally feel proud to be who they are."*

Amanda is an Aboriginal Education Officer who has worked in youth detention for more than a decade. She entered the evaluation interview with a quiet authority and a clear message: Djamu is, in her words, "*the only program where the boys get to be fully themselves*."

In her role, Amanda supports the educational and cultural development of Aboriginal students, operating at the intersection of school, community and cultural knowledge. She described frequent frustration that culture is often sidelined in favour of behavioural management and compliance. For Amanda, Djamu fundamentally changed this dynamic by placing culture at the centre of practice rather than at the edges.

Amanda explained that Djamu offers a space where the boys *"drop the tough mask*." She described watching young people walk in "*angry from the unit*," only to see them calm down within minutes of starting the session: "*You watch them walk in angry from the unit, but after five minutes with Djamu they're calm, talking soft, focused. That's medicine right there."* She emphasised that Djamu uses culturally embedded pedagogy that resonates with Aboriginal learners—visual, slow-paced, relational and grounded in story—rather than relying on abstract or text-heavy approaches.

Over time, Amanda observed profound changes in the young people who participated. She described their physical presence shifting as "*their chests come forward*" and they "*stand taller,"* concluding that *"Djamu makes them proud to be Koori."* She linked Djamu days to improved school attendance, greater willingness to try new tasks and more respectful interactions with staff across the centre.

Amanda also commented on the impact of Djamu on her own practice. She stated that she had learned cultural elements she had not been taught growing up, including shield design, the use of ochre and local stories. *"It strengthens me as well*," she reflected, noting that Djamu feeds her cultural and professional identity at the same time as it supports the young people.

18.1.2 Staff Case Study 2 — Reiby Psychologists: Luna, Skyler and Billy

"Djamu does half the therapeutic work for us."

The psychology team at Reiby works with some of the most complex and traumatised young people in New South Wales. They described ongoing challenges in building rapport, particularly with boys who view psychological services with suspicion or associate them with assessment and risk management rather than support.

Billy explained that Djamu fundamentally changes the emotional baseline of the young people they see. He observed that "*when they're in Djamu, their nervous systems settle. Art is regulating—slow hands, slow breath, slow heart."* The psychologists routinely used Djamu sessions as reference points in subsequent counselling, drawing on shared experiences and images created in the program.

Skyler noted that young people often attended psychological sessions in a noticeably different state after Djamu: "*After Djamu, they come to their sessions calmer, less defensive. It's like the door opens."* This shift allowed therapeutic conversations to go deeper and proceed with less resistance.

Luna described Djamu as a bridge between psychology and culture. She explained that "*the art lets them express trauma without the shame of talking. It gives us something to work with."* Paintings and designs frequently revealed emotional states, family dynamics and symbolic themes long before the young people felt comfortable disclosing these experiences verbally. Djamu therefore became an indirect yet powerful assessment and intervention tool.

The psychologists also reflected on their own learning. They reported that Djamu had expanded their understanding of south-eastern cultural traditions and provided a richer cultural frame for interpreting trauma. As Skyler put it, "*We're trained in trauma, but not in culture. Djamu fills that gap."*

18.2.3 Staff Case Study 3 — Program Staff: Lynne and Jonah (Riverina)

"This is what rehabilitation looks like."

Lynne and Jonah are program officers responsible for coordinating a wide range of group programs, including education, behaviour-focused interventions, personal development and reintegration activities. Their case study illustrates how Djamu reshapes expectations about what effective programming can look like.

Jonah described the impact of Djamu on engagement with group work. He observed that *"some boys who won't sit still for five minutes in any other program will sit for ninety minutes in Djamu, not moving."* This experience prompted him to re-evaluate long-standing assumptions about "difficult" behaviour: "*When you see that, you realise it's not the kids—it's the program."*

Lynne spoke about the skills she gained through working alongside Djamu facilitators. She learned specific art techniques such as shading, carving and ochre mixing, as well as broader approaches to pacing and relational interaction. "*I feel confident now to run creative sessions. Djamu taught me how,"* she explained. She has since incorporated these techniques into other programs, adapting content to be more visual, hands-on and culturally responsive.

Both Lynne and Jonah reported noticeable behavioural change among young people who used Djamu as a self-regulation strategy. Lynne recalled an incident in which a young person was escalating in the unit. Instead of continuing the conflict, he stated, "I need to go do art," and independently walked to the Djamu space. Lynne concluded, "*That's behaviour change,"* emphasising that the young person actively chose a constructive regulating activity rather than engaging in confrontation.

18.2.4 Staff Case Study 4 — Youth Officers: Emma, Kevin and Nathan (Orana)

"If the whole centre ran like Djamu, you wouldn't have half the dramas we do."

Youth Officers (YOs) maintain daily structure, safety and routines. Their perspective reflects frontline operational reality and the practical implications of Djamu for centre functioning.

Emma described Djamu as uniquely safe in terms of behaviour and atmosphere. She stated that "*they don't arc up in Djamu. It's the safest place in the whole centre*." Kevin added that, during Djamu, young people *"drop their shoulders*" and *"stop scanning the room,"* behaviours that are otherwise rare in a custodial setting where hypervigilance is common.

Before Djamu, several YOs reported feeling hesitant to talk about culture with Aboriginal young people for fear of "getting it wrong" or causing offence. Emma explained, *"We didn't want to say the wrong thing."* Nathan reflected that Djamu gave him new confidence: *"Now I can talk about local shields, patterns, mob. I wouldn't have done that before."* Through repeated exposure to Djamu sessions, the YOs developed a more informed and respectful language for discussing culture and identity.

YOs consistently reported calmer units and fewer incidents on days when Djamu ran. They noticed that young people returned from Djamu more relaxed and less likely to engage in conflict or defiance. Kevin summarised the collective view succinctly: "*They're different blokes after that class."* From an operational standpoint, Djamu was perceived to directly contribute to reduced incident rates and a safer overall environment.

Table 4. National youth justice over-representation (Australia)

Indicator	Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people	Non-Indigenous / total comparison	Interpretation
Share of population aged 10–17	6.6%	—	Baseline population proportion.
Share of young people (10–17) under youth justice supervision on an average day (2023–24)	57% (1,852 under supervision)	—	Disproportionate supervision relative to population share.
Average-day supervision rate (10–17)	1.1%	0.06%	First Nations young people experience markedly higher supervision rates.
Relative likelihood of being under supervision (First Nations vs non-Indigenous)	—	~19× higher	Structural disparity in youth justice supervision.
Relative likelihood of being in detention (First Nations vs non-Indigenous)	—	~27× higher	Disparity is even more pronounced in detention.

Source: AIHW (2025; 2025a), as cited in text.

Table 5. National youth detention profile (June quarter 2024)

Indicator	Value	Interpretation
People aged 10+ in detention on an average night who were First Nations	509 of 845 (60.2%)	Around three in five people in detention were First Nations.
People aged 10–17 in detention on an average night who were First Nations	471 of 722 (65.2%)	Around two in three children in detention were First Nations.
First Nations share of the 10–17 population	6.6%	Detention share far exceeds population share.
Pattern over time (at least since 2020–21)	Roughly half to two-thirds	Persistent over-representation in detention while comprising <7% of the cohort.

Source: AIHW (2022; 2024; 2025), as cited in text.

Table 6. Broader carceral context (adult imprisonment, Australia)

Indicator	Value (as stated in text)	Interpretation
First Nations share of total Australian population	~3–4%	Baseline population proportion.
First Nations share of adult prison population	>30%	Sustained over-representation in imprisonment.
First Nations women's imprisonment trend since the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody	More than doubled	Indicates escalation of women's incarceration.
First Nations women's share of women in prison	~34%	Severe over-representation of women in custody.
First Nations share of adult female population	~2%	Illustrates scale of disproportionality for women.

Source: ALRC (2017); HRLC (2017); Oscar (2018); SBS/NITV (2017), as cited in text.

Table 7. NSW youth justice context

Indicator	Value	Interpretation
First Nations share of children in youth detention (NSW)	~60%	Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children constitute the majority of children in detention.
Aboriginal share of youth population (NSW)	~8%	Baseline population proportion.
Change in number of children incarcerated in NSW (Jun 2023 → Jun 2025)	+34%	Marked escalation in youth incarceration numbers.
Driver noted in reporting	More restrictive bail laws → more remand	Policy settings are associated with increased remand detention.
Average daily number of First Nations young people in custody (late 2025)	~129 per day	Ongoing scale of Aboriginal over-representation in NSW custody.

Source: BOCSAR (2025); Aboriginal Legal Service NSW/ACT (2025); ABC News (2025); NSW Department of Communities and Justice (2025), as cited in text.