Article

Pushed Out for Missing School: The Role of Social Disparities and School Truancy in Dropping Out

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Abstract: Research: The goal of this study is to understand the experiences of Black and Latino former high school students who dropped out, or were pushed out, of a large urban school district in Southern California. Specifically, this paper examines the barriers students faced that contributed to them leaving high school and their journey afterward. Thirty-nine former high school students who "dropped out", or were pushed out of school, 61.5% males (*n* = 24) and 38.5% females (*n* = 15), were interviewed. Findings: The findings indicate the use of punitive truancy control for dealing with health and psychological needs of students, transportation issues, personnel–student relationships, and standardized testing. Examining the experiences of students who have been pushed out of school can help educators and policy makers address some of the inequities within schools. Results: We argue that pushout prevention can be developed by changing truancy and other discipline policies in schools. Implications from this study help us understand how we can better support students before they are pushed out.

Keywords: pushed out; truancy; chronic absenteeism; high school dropouts; homelessness

1. Introduction

Truancy is a national issue that affects various personnel in schools, social services, human and health services, family services, family policy, community members, the juvenile justice system, the criminal behavior system, and national citizenship and socialization services. Nationally, data show that the chances of students, especially from disadvantaged backgrounds, dropping out of high school increase by 20 percentage points for every week of school they miss [1]. Latino youth and Black youth drop out at a higher than average rate of 8.2% and 6.5%, respectively, compared to 4.3% of White youth dropout, with Asian youth experiencing the lowest dropout rate at 2.1% and with Native American youth dropping out at the highest rate at 11.0% [2]. Balfanz and Bynes [3] identify absenteeism as a national problem with between 5 million and 7.5 million students nationwide not regularly attending school.

In high school, chronic absenteeism is associated with dropping out of school, poor academic achievement, homelessness, and delinquency, increasing the achievement gap for low-income students and students of color [3,4]. Students who are absent on average 1–2 days per month have a one in five chance of actually graduating from high school [5]. One of the factors that contributes to this alarming statistic is that harsh school punishment disproportionately affects racial and ethnic minority students in urban settings [6–10]. It is argued that truancy policies actually alienate and disproportionally punish Black and Latino youth and their families, rather than making school more accessible for students [11,12]. Rios [13] finds that Latino students that experience harsh truancy sanctions at school end up being more vulnerable to police contact, arrest, and incarceration.

Bringing together the literature on the history of dropouts in the United States and the literature on truancy policies, we can better make sense of the experiences of those who have been systematically pushed out of school. Specifically, the goal of this study is to identify why students were being pushed out of high schools and in what ways chronic absenteeism played a role.

2. The History of Dropouts in the United States

Between 1993 and 2002, the dropout rates in the United States increased, while the graduation rates decreased. In 2004, there were between 900 and 1000 high schools with a graduating rate of 50% and a dropout rate of 50% [14]. A typical high school class would shrink by 40% between freshman and senior year. On a national scale, 80% of the high schools that produced the highest number of dropouts were in the following 15 states: Arizona, California, Georgia, Florida, Illinois, Louisiana, Michigan, Mississippi, New Mexico, New York, North Carolina, Ohio, Pennsylvania, South Carolina, and Texas [14].

Orfield, Losen, Wald, and Swanson [15] reported that nationally, high school graduation rates were low for all students; it was estimated that 68% of students who enter the 9th grade in a regular curriculum graduate in the 12th grade with a regular diploma. However, students of color graduated with substantially lower rates, particularly males. In 2005, the national graduation rate was 70%, with 50% for Native Americans, 55% for Blacks, 58% for Latinxs, 78% for Whites, and 85% for Asians and 68% males and 78% females. Urban areas had a graduation rate of 61% compared to a 75% graduation rate in suburbs [12,16]. In 2009, it was reported that the dropout rate for bilingual students who were denied bilingual classes nearly doubled [17]. In 2010, graduation rates increased and dropout rates decreased with progress in suburbs, towns, and urban districts using rigorous curriculum to obtain meaningful options to prepare students for college and work, setting a goal of a 90% high school graduation rate by 2020 [18].

In 2017, the Institute of Education Science [IES] reported the status of dropout rates of sixteen-year-olds to twenty-four-year-olds who attend school by race/ethnicity [19]. IES reported 2.1 million status dropouts between the ages of 16–24 and an overall dropout rate of 5.4%. The dropout rate varied by race/ethnicity as follows: American Indian/Alaska Native youth had the highest status dropout rate of all racial/ethnic groups at 10.1%. The dropout rate for Latinx youth was 8.2%, 6.5% for Black youth, 4.5% for youth of two or more races, 4.3% for White youth, 3.9% for Pacific Islander youth, and 2.1% for Asian youth [19].

Bridgeland, Dilulio, and Morrison [20] surveyed students who dropped out and concluded that while some students drop out of school because of significant academic challenges, most students who drop out believe they could have completed school. Nearly half of the students in the study felt that classes were not interesting, and they were bored and disengaged from high school. Two-thirds said that they would have worked harder if more was demanded of them [higher standards, more studying, and required homework].

Students also provided personal reasons for dropping out of school. A total of 22% said that they had to care for a family member. A total of 26% said that they became a parent. A total of 32% said that they had to get a job and make money. Furthermore, some students left school because of significant academic challenges. A total of 35% said that "failing in school" was a major factor for dropping out. Three out of 10 said that they could not keep up with schoolwork. A total of 43% said that they missed too many days of school and could not catch up. A total of 45% said that they started high school poorly prepared by their earlier schooling.

Dropout rates can also be attributed to inequities in the education system. Students likely fell behind in elementary and middle school and could not make up the necessary groundwork. The additional support in high school that would have made a difference, such as tutoring and/or after school help, was not provided. It is important to note that the most academically challenged students were the most likely to report that their schools were not doing enough to help students when they had trouble learning and expressed doubt about whether they would have worked harder if more

had been expected of them [20]. Numerous articles discuss the relationship between achievement and dropouts [21]. A closer look at the role of absenteeism and truancy is needed to gain a more nuanced understanding of the impact on students and families.

3. Truancy and Get-Tough Policies

All states in the United States have laws governing compulsory education covering school attendance/truancy issues [12]. Most states have framed attendance/truancy policies to hold parents responsible for the actions of their children [minors]. Some states have focused on state attendance/truancy policies that criminalize parents and students [12,22]. According to Reyes [12], some states and jurisdictions have organized truancy prevention around one or more of the following factors: social competence, health, family services, family policy, academic success, juvenile justice, criminal behavior, and Americanization. According to state and federal data, truants tend to be overwhelmingly African American and Hispanic. Males and females represent truants almost equally. Furthermore, almost 50% of females live in single-parent households, and 33% live in poverty. Truancy spikes in the ninth grade; however, it is also a severe problem in elementary school [23]. Truancy is the first and best indicator that a student is headed for trouble [4,24,25]. Truancy affects student achievement, including poor performance on standardized tests [26,27], and can result in students dropping out of high school [20,28]. The authors [28] proposed that in order to decrease truancy and student dropout rates, all states need to increase their minimum school-leaving age to 18. According to Kronholz [23], the problem may be found in school organizations that want to run on tight rules for students who are in bodies and minds that crave more independence and seek a caring adult or a circle of friends in a big school where teachers are pressured to boost accountability through high achievement with a lack of relatedness [23]. Some researchers contend that although schools may contribute to the problem, family and social conditions equally contribute to problems leading to truancy [23].

The law and order—get-tough—approach used to crack down on school truancy penalizes parents through fines and jail time [12]. For example, the Pennsylvania state get-tough truancy policy requires that after "three days of unexcused absence from school", students and the responsible parent are referred to court and fined $300 per additional unexcused absence. In addition, court costs for each unexcused student are added to the total for parents to pay. Since 2000, Berks County has jailed 1600 parents—mostly mothers—for failure to pay truancy fines. In Pennsylvania, a 55-year-old single mother of eight was incarcerated for two days because she owed more than $2000 in fines and court costs related to the truancy of two of her teenage sons [22]. This mother suffered from several health problems and died in a jail cell because she was incarcerated without access to her medications for high blood pressure, anxiety, and bipolar disorder. She was unemployed and lived in a house owned by a relative. An older son stated that caring for her family was a struggle. He said, "My brothers, despite truancy, are good kids. They are not out running the streets committing crimes". Moreover, this mother had children in different schools who were in different jurisdictions; consequently, she had to attend court under two different judges for 55 truancy charges [22]. One judge discussed her case with her and cleared her. The second judge ordered her to document her inability to pay the truancy fees. When she failed to do so, he issued an arrest warrant and sent her to jail where she died [12].

While the research identifies several major factors that affect truancy, 40 states regard their truancy policy to be based on law and order and view punishment as a status offense [12]. A status offense is a violation of the law only because of the youth's status as a minor [anyone under the age of 18] and not the seriousness of the crime [12]; however, the offense creates a criminal record that must be formally expunged [29]. Approximately 20% of all juvenile arrests involve status offenses [30]. A total of 50% of all status offenses are for truancy [30]. Truancy is categorized as a status offense based on the state-designated number of days absent without a valid excuse, ranging from three days a year to 18 absences [30]. School peace officers enforce truancy laws.

Truancy Impact on Families

While arrests of truant students and their parents are declining in most states, more than 150,000 parents are fined annually and must pay court costs [12]. Goldstein [22] reports that over 1000 truant students are removed from their homes each year and placed in foster homes, group homes, or juvenile detention centers for nothing more than absences from school. In addition, 15,000 truants are placed on juvenile probation. Probation is followed by probation violations, such as breaking curfew or missing additional days of school, leading to detention or out-of-home placement. Because truancy court violations are data not kept by the districts, other than news articles, there are no reliable data on the legal consequences faced by parents for truancy.

According to the research, school district efforts have reduced absences using cost-effective methods [12]. In a recent piece [31], the most successful intervention strategy was one that sent families an average of four mail-based treatments, emphasizing the importance of attendance and the consequences of absences. The intervention method reduced chronic absenteeism by 11%, with consistency across grades, races, genders, and socioeconomic statuses, and spilled over to non-targeted siblings living in the same household. Gottfried and Hutt [31] caution that interventions such as this are not substitutes for interventions that are more intensive but, rather, provide complements that could free schools and educators to direct their scarce resources toward more intensive and comprehensive efforts.

Gottfried and Gee [32] focused on early education and kindergarten to highlight chronic absenteeism and found that the more connections between parents and schools, the less chronic absenteeism; kindergartners from larger families and lower Socioeconomic (SES) status were more likely to be chronically absent. While their study focused on early education and kindergarten absenteeism, the question remains how the effects of poverty, discipline, race, and culture and how discouragement from school personnel may impact chronic absenteeism [12].

4. Consequences of Truancy Policies and Reasons for Absenteeism

For students from adverse backgrounds to persevere and persist through challenging and difficult situations in school, at home, and elsewhere, they must have the support and motivation to help them believe in themselves. While less attention is paid to the importance of emotional support and caring from teachers towards high school students, evidence shows that these relationships are critical to engagement in class and attendance [1]. Knesting's [33] qualitative study focused on a group of 17 high school students, from grades 9 through 12, who were labeled highly "at risk" of dropping out, but persisted to complete their education, and found that the most significant factor that influenced these students' persistence was the few committed and caring teachers they encountered in their academic careers. For Latino students, even more than support from peers and family, support from teachers was the most powerful indicator of academic outcomes, including higher high school graduation rates and attendance at postsecondary institutions [34]. Often racially marginalized students feel a disconnection from school and from their teachers, thus leading to a feeling that no one cares at school and ultimately causing an increase in missing school [1,13,35]. Van Eck, Johnson, Bettencourt, and Johnson [36] found a direct link between high school students' school climates [e.g., relationships with teachers and connectedness at school] and their absenteeism. For students at a higher risk of absenteeism, after working with mentors, these high school students were less likely to miss school compared to similar peers, which also let to a slight increase in their academic achievement [36].

Additionally, students are often disengaged from school because they do not see themselves in the curriculum, and research has shown that culturally relevant curriculum has been associated with an increase in attendance for students [1]. For example, Dee and Penner [37], in a longitudinal study targeting those with GPA's under a 2.0, found that for 9th-grade students in an ethnic studies class, their attendance increased by 21%. While there are many reasons why students are absent from school, much is still unknown about the immediate triggers leading to leaving high school [38].

5. Pushed Out of School

The literature on students that have left school often refers to these individuals as dropouts [15,39]. These individuals between the ages of 16 and 24 without a high school diploma or GED are assumed to have left school by choice. However, new literature on these students identifies structural and contextual conditions that cause these high school dropouts to leave school for various reasons. Students who are pulled out of school would be expected to finish high school otherwise, if it were not for familial obligations, such as work [10,40,41], while pushouts speak to the structural inequity of students being encouraged to leave school for reasons that may include insufficient credit, behavioral issues, age, and pregnancy [42,43]. Often, the distinction between students who drop out of school and students who are pushed out of school is not examined. Lukes [42] argues that pushouts have been categorized and labeled as dropouts in research conducted around policy and education. Students who are pushed out of school are often described as disengaged from school by faculty and staff [10]. Researchers have explored how harsh discipline in school is often used as a way of weeding out students that are considered disruptive and undisciplined [11,44]. Students who experience absenteeism are often caught up in harsh zero-tolerance policies and practices that result in suspending and expelling them for truancy [10,45,46]. This criminalization of social circumstance impacts students' ability to continue on their educational trajectory.

6. The Current Study

Pullout factors, such as poverty, domestic abuse, and violent neighborhoods, are rarely accounted for in the discussion of dropouts, and little is known about the immediate experiences that lead to students leaving high school [38]. Few scholars have accounted for how pullout factors encourage schools to generate pushout factors. This paper examines the ways student pullout factors actually lead to the institutional and systematic pushout of students of color via chronic absenteeism and examines ways that school districts can intervene before it is too late. Examining the experiences of students who have been pushed out of school can help educators better understand where interventions would be most critical. Because it is often difficult to track down students who leave school, little is known about the experiences of these particular students.

6.1. Participants and Procedures

Thirty-nine former high school students who were pushed out of school were interviewed. The sample consists of 38.5% females (*n* = 15) and 61.5% males (*n* = 24). The mean age is 18.1 years, and the sample consists of 27 Latino and 12 African American/Black youth. All participants aspired to graduate high school, with approximately 85% wanting to graduate from some college (2-year, 4-year, or graduate school). Participants reported that 15% of their moms completed a GED or high school diploma and 20% of their fathers completed a GED or diploma. The remaining parents either completed some high school or less, and 31% and 36% reported that they did not know their mothers' and fathers' education level, respectively. All participants reported living below the poverty line, and while the students lived in the surrounding area, they previously attended a handful of different high schools. Participants were recruited at a community center in a low-income area in Southern California. The director of the community program provided access to the center and the participants. Participants in the program had left high school and were currently preparing for their GED, enrolled in alternative schooling, or trying to get back into a high school program.

All participants' interviews were approximately one hour and took place at a private office in the community center. All interviews were audio-recorded and later transcribed. A credentialed social worker was on location in case the interviews invoked previous trauma. Participants received $20 for their interview. An Institutional Review Board proposal was submitted, and the researchers were approved to use human subjects in this research project. Participants were all asked the following questions:

1. Why did you leave your high school?
2. Can you recall when it happened?
3. What led to this decision?

Based on these questions, participants shared about their life stories and were encouraged with probes asking to give examples or a more detailed explanation.

6.2. Analytic Procedure

After each audio-recorded interview, the tapes were transcribed using verbatim translations. The documents were uploaded to Dedoose, a mixed-methods, data-analysis program. Data triangulation was achieved by using three sets of data to develop the central themes/concepts [47]. We achieved triangulation by reading and listening to each transcribed document three times. Elaborate coding was used to extend our understanding of why students left school [48]. Three cycles of elaborate coding took place: [1] central coding, [2] related coding, and [3] further analyzing the related coding. Our first central code was "students reasons for leaving school". Our initial analyses focused on the central themes. We then created codes, such as, "mental health", "physical health" "trauma, "transportation" "relationships", "fears", and "jobs". We coded how these themes related to students' absences and leaving school. We reviewed the transcripts together and underlined the central codes in one color and the related codes in another.

6.3. Results

A total of 90% of the participants reported that their experience with leaving school was a result of an interaction in the counseling office, where they were told that they did not have enough credits. Participants mentioned that they left high school after a meeting with a counselor or administrative team who told them that there was no way they could catch up with credits in time to graduate. Similar stories were told from participants coming from various high schools. Most participants reported feeling defeated, discouraged, and like they had few alternatives or options to graduate and stay in school. Excerpted in this section are the voices of the students who were interviewed. The following participant describes his experience:

> *"They called me in, and they said that they're going to drop me, well kick me out of the school cause I didn't have enough credits and that I'll make the school look bad. I was like in a room with four people, and the lady just said "I'm kicking you out here's this paper and you can call your parents if you want them to pick you up or you can leave. So, I just left. I was mad at first because I wish they would've told me cause I was doing all this work, all this makeup work, I don't know ... just threw it all away. It's like I did work for no reason; they should've just told me like we're going to drop you out."*

> (Arturo)

When initially asked why they left school, participants shared the experiences of their final interactions with school personnel. However, when probed to talk about their experiences in school, their stories emerged and led to a deeper delve into the reasons for absenteeism. The following categories emerged as reasons for missing school: mental health and trauma (70%), physical health (60%), negative school relationships (40%), standardized testing (30%), transportation issues (20%), and fear of deportation (10%). The following sections describe participants' experiences within these categories.

7. Mental Health and Trauma

Every student who was interviewed spoke about various traumas in their lives ranging from a family member/parent being killed due to violence to coping with being homeless with all the collateral issues that compound the main problem of being homeless. Within these stories of trauma, 70% of the students shared their individual histories of experiencing the unexpected consequences and the

coping mechanisms they were forced to develop to deal with their experiences. Students reported bottling up the stress to the point of contemplating suicide. For example, one student said,

> *"I just carry the stress with me every day, you know. I don't keep it bottled inside, but I just have it there, you know, the stress. I have it packed. I have everything, you know. I just don't know how to deal with it. I spent about a week in the hospital. It was a mental facility because of thoughts of suicide. While I was there all I did was just think. I thought about, you know, like, maybe I don't really want to kill myself. Maybe it's just that I keep myself silenced, you know? I keep myself, like, away from things but at the same time I carry this weight on me that I'm letting it bring me down. I'm just letting it, you know, just keep me down. So, with this stress and these problems, I just pretend that it's not there and that it is not true."*

(Delberto)

Similarly, another student mentioned her initial coping strategy was to bottle up her pain and to escape her trauma by using alcohol and smoking; however, she also shared her healing revelation when she began an exercise program that led her to positive thinking and coping. She shared,

> *"Not too long ago I used to deal with my problems by drinking, smoking, and all that, but now it's the other day, I just I went for a run, and I felt good after the run. I was able to let all that steam out and that doesn't happen when I drink. With drinking you just kind of like indulge it, and you just, like, it just piles up. And not with running. It's like I feel like you let it out. So, that's why I started to run. And it's good for me too. But, it's hard because all the other things. But, I used to deal with it by keeping it bottled up, to drink, and I said I would never drink 'cause my dad was an alcoholic. So, when I started losing myself because I did something I thought I never would do, it just didn't matter."*

(Jessica)

One of the most common observed student responses when faced with major trauma was students internalizing their emotions, and one of the most common coping strategies was to shut people out. Rhea described the range of emotions she felt when her father was murdered:

> *"I think I got more anxiety and depressed when my father was murdered. I feel like I got more anti-social with people. I was just like, I don't want to be bothered by no one; I just want to be alone, like that just how my attitude was after that happened. And, when I first found out that my dad was gonna die, like they were like he was like 80 percent dead. I was like? like no like this can't be happening. Then, I had like tears rolling down my face, I was just like I can't, I can't deal. Like I can't even, I don't even want to look at nobody; I don't even want to talk to nobody. I was like more angry, and then I was when I first found out that he got shot. Then I got more angry when I found out that he was going to die. And I was like; you know what, like that's how my attitude was. I was like fuck the world; I don't care, like I don't want to talk to nobody. Like that's just how my attitude was. I was like fuck it, I'm done, and I just want to be alone. I couldn't get up to go to school and people just thought I didn't care."*

(Rhea)

Rhea also discussed how she had no adults she could talk to about what she was feeling, and there was no one in her life she could trust. The impact of the emotional trauma had physical repercussions on her health, and Rhea struggled to make it to school.

8. Physical Health

Students frequently mentioned physical health as a reason they missed school. One student talked about his experience dealing with a severe stomach virus. While he shared that he spoke with his counselor about being sick, he also reported receiving mixed messages about missing school. He initially thought he had been granted permission to miss school when he was sick; however, he

was shocked to find out that he did not have enough credits because he missed so much school. He explained,

> *"Cause I had like some virus in my stomach, and the counselor told me that I could stay home longer, but then, he ended up saying that I didn't get no credit for everything that I did earlier so I was out like thirty more credits. It's um, I don't like it; like at first, it was just like I couldn't believe I had it, and just the thought I couldn't eat anything like how I used to and when you're a kid you want to eat like all the bomb candy and shit and you just can't; you just can't anymore; you got to start eating healthy. I don't mind eating healthy; it's just like the thought that I could die any minute; I could stab my toe and get an infection and that could be it."*

> (Adam)

Research has found that physical health is complicated by living conditions and homelessness, which leads to an increase in absenteeism [49]. Students also mentioned the consequences of homelessness and housing instability on their physical health. This was especially pertinent for students dealing with chronic illnesses. For example, one student discussed his experience with diabetes and living in a motel. He said,

> *"When I was little I would live in motels with my brother, and I would go to school with like fucked up clothes, and I really didn't care about that but just the thought that I had to go back home to a dirty ass motel. I think that's like a cool year or two, then became diabetic when I was like in the 8th grade, and I had to deal with that ever since."*

> (Arturo)

Students talked about being unable to address their physical ailments due to financial reasons, time constraints ("just getting to the doctor takes too much time"), and limited resources, for example, transportation. One student said it was "difficult to attend school when I felt so sick all of the time and I didn't know that my mom was supposed to call in sick for me."

9. Transportation

Merely getting to school was an issue for students. Research studies have shown that students whose transportation routes include passage through higher crime areas [via walking and waiting at stops] are more likely to miss school [50]. Students frequently mentioned the amount of time it took to wait for the buses and how the journey to and from school was physically exhausting. For example,

> *"Oh, I stopped going because, I don't know, I just didn't want to continue because I had to catch two buses. Um, I had to wake up like around five and then yeah. And then to catch the two buses, so it was hard for me and then to go back home. I was doing good, but I just stopped going. It was tiring."*

> (Delia)

Students also spoke to the unreliability of transportation and how this uncertainty played a role in the increase in anxiety they experienced.

> *"I finished up until the first semester of eleventh grade. The school bus would come, and I would have to leave my home, like, I want to say like 5:30 a.m. Yeah, just to catch the bus. And I would get home until like 5 p.m. There were some few days where I would come even home later because of the bus, transportation and all that was late or wouldn't show up. So, then it became really hectic, it became really stressful, and it started affecting my health. I started having some palpitations, started, you know, that was messing up my breathing. And so, then I went to the doctor and they told me to relax if it was possible to get out of that high school, it was so much stress, and move into my home school."*

> (Vanessa)

She continued to explain that in the process of moving schools to attend one closer to her home, she experienced the school turning her away because she was about to be 18 years old.

"So, I did check it out and it was really sad and when I went to apply and they just literally closed the doors in my face. They did not accept me whatsoever. They said, 'You're going to be 18 already? We will enroll you with the adult school? And as soon as I heard that I was like, oh, I don't want to go to adult school. I don't want nothing like that, continuation? I don't want to! I just didn't want to. And, so, I gave up."

(Vanessa)

10. Relationships with Teachers and Administration

Research has shown that relationships with teachers and school personnel are critical for students' sense of belonging and engagement, especially for Latina/o students [51]. Students did not mention positive relationships with school personnel. All mention of teachers and administration were either negative or indifferent. Students even talked about feeling invisible, especially when teachers did not even know their names.

"Like all the other teachers at the other school they just they don't even know your name they just call you" kid in the back" or "you with that blue backpack". I didn't really talk to no one and the teachers just wanted to get out of there."

(Jack)

Without connected relationships at school, students often felt like it did not matter and that no one cared if they even showed up for class.

11. Standardized Testing

Many participants also reported that they were not able to graduate because they were unable to pass the California High School Exit Exam (CAHSEE). For example,

"Well, that day, what happened that day when I found out I wasn't going to graduate, I was actually talking to my counselor, and she was telling me, you're not going to graduate, you don't have enough credits, you haven't passed the CAHSEE... when she told me that I wanted to cry but I didn't want to seem weak, so I didn't. I went to class as if nothing...I was disappointed, I was sad, I was depressed...I was not going graduate with my class with my friends, and I was pretty sad."

(Belinda)

Belinda went on to talk about how this experience caused her shame and embarrassment after talking with her counselor and described her interaction and communication with her mom.

"Having to tell my mom that I wasn't...I couldn't deal with it, so I just dropped out. She was like, I told you to keep trying, I told you to keep trying, you're going make it. When I told my mom I was not going graduate, she was, she just told me like, "I told you to keep trying. I told you to keep trying." It's like when you're boxing, when someone's boxing, you keep going, and when you see the person starting to lose, you keep going, you don't stop because if you stop, you're going lose, and that's what I did. I stopped and I lost."

(Belinda)

12. Fear of Deportation

There is often a sense of silence surrounding the fear undocumented high school students experience regarding themselves or their families being deported [52,53] and the impact it has on academic success and uncertainty about their future [54,55].

"Oh, well when, as I was growing up my fear of just being deported was great. It was really, really just immense. And I would be so careful not to do anything bad because of the fear of police and authorities. Because there were rumors and I've seen it, you know, where, you know, brutality, racism,

you know, injustice. So, yeah, it would fear me. It would fear me a lot. Like, it would really scare me. Especially with my parents I would think, Oh, well, if they deport me, you know, I'm a little girl. I don't think they're just going to throw me out or so I thought. And then, but it would fear me that if they were to catch my parents, you know, and take them away from me and that was just going to destroy me. I would miss school because I was afraid to leave the house."

(Viviana)

13. Working to Help the Family

Working in order to help the family was another reason reported for students missing school.

" … more than ten absences right here is you're like out. Sometimes I work, sometimes I did something else and usually I didn't have uh like permission or anything. So, they'll just count it as absent."

(Charlie)

"I had to work to help my mom pay the bills. I didn't have a choice. I had to help feed my family."

(Danica)

All of the students in the study reported leaving school due to a lack of credits stemming from absenteeism. However, students reported being absent for various reasons. These results help us better understand from the student's perspective how health disparities, transportation issues, personnel–student relationships, fears, and work played a role in getting pushed out of school.

14. Discussion

This study gives us a glimpse into the perceptions of students who experienced being pushed out of school. On the surface, it appeared that students were pushed out of school because they simply did not have enough credits, mostly from missing class. However, through the interviews, students were able to share their stories of how they ended up leaving their high school. During the initial stages of the conversations, students expressed confusion as to why they had to leave school, and often, they were not expecting or wanting to leave school. This speaks to a tragedy within our educational system when the most vulnerable population so quickly gets the door shut in their face. Despite the fact that various high schools are represented in this study, students' stories remain consistent as to the messages from their counselors and their experiences with missing school. This study forces the researchers, who are also educators, to think deeper about the ways educators can intervene and communicate better with students before it is too late.

Students often were caught off guard or surprised that they were being forced to leave school, making the researchers question how much effort the schools expend in their attempts to communicate with students and families and how important explicit messaging is for these high school students. Additionally, it was clear from the students' perceptions of their experiences that their parents were not included in discussions at the school. This is particularly important when unexcused absences can lead to the criminalization of both parents and students [22,29].

The most prevalent themes that emerged were students missing school due to consequences related to mental and physical health. Unaddressed issues pertaining to mental health led to students missing school. Through anxiety, depression, and even hospitalization due to suicidal thoughts, students often were not able to physically make it to school as a result of their trauma. In addition to mental health, physical health was a major reason for students missing school. These findings are supported by research that has found that physical health and access to proper medical resources are major concerns for students who end up missing school [1]. Martinez, Rubin, Russell, Leslie, and Brugge [56] argue how important it is to allow community voice and involvement in addressing solutions to health-related disparities. Along with health disparities, we can see how necessities, such as basic transportation to and from school, can lead to missing school and manifesting symptoms of

anxiety. Riding the bus to school significantly decreases kindergartners absenteeism, especially in rural areas [57]; however, public transportation in urban areas for older kids may increase absenteeism [1,12]. While transportation is one of the more expensive interventions for schools, somehow we need to address the issue of unreliable transportation services in many urban cities [1].

Although research shows the importance of building relationships with students and showing empathy [58], school counselors have shifted to a more technical approach to their occupations [59]. This was evidenced in the way that the students reported their interactions with their counselors. We can catch a glimpse of the ways that critical interactions with school personnel can prompt students to give up altogether through our understanding of Belinda's experience with her counselor. Belinda recounts how her mom was always encouraging her, wanted her to pursue school, told her to never give up, and wanted her to succeed. This counters much of the deficit literature that speaks to ethnic minority parents not caring about their children's education [60]. Belinda described pretending that the news from her counselor did not affect her by trying to bury it and continue with her day as usual; yet, she describes her devastation and how she came to the decision to quit. This specific case describes a critical transaction when Belinda was pushout out of school. Without analyzing her experience, it may appear on the surface that Belinda just did not care about school. We also see an opportunity lost when there was no intervention and communication between Belinda's mother and the school.

As these relationships are crucial, it is important for students to feel connected and supported by the teachers and staff in their schools, especially through the difficult experiences that may otherwise prevent them from succeeding [33]. It is important that we support future teachers and train them to engage students in culturally responsive and caring ways and to challenge deficit practices that push youth out of the education system [61–63]. Therefore, it is crucial for intervention and dropout prevention programs that work with the most "at-risk" students, who come from adverse environments, to focus on the development of relationships that help them develop the necessary skills to succeed in and out of the classroom.

Recommendations for the future are supported by research including Tier I efforts focused on developing a school ethos grounded on the importance of attending, using modified and simplified language congruent with community ethos, emphasized parental efficacy, and recognizing student hardships as evident, as in the case studies provided in this paper [64]. Home visits, while taxing on teachers, will provide first-hand knowledge of family hardships and an appreciation from parents that the teacher and the school care. They will also reveal if a child is homeless.

Tier 2 interventions target students who struggle with attendance and benefit from focused mentoring programs, often funded with foundation money, but who often lack transportation. As evident in the case studies reviewed in this study, students often missed school because they had no transportation or inadequate transportation. According to Gottfried [57], when schools provide transportation, truancy is reduced. However, in large urban school districts, public transportation contributes to truancy. Tier 3 interventions are more comprehensive and include programs such as truancy courts, interagency housing efforts, and case management cases, which are less punitive than the student/parent ticketing systems [12].

Other implications from this study can help us better prepare pre-service and in-service teachers and educators on the critical importance of building trust and relationships with students, especially for students of color [62]. For example, Reyes and Garcia [65] found that in a low-income school with Latino students and English-language learners that was up for closure, a culturally and linguistically relevant principal was able to establish connections with the community, the students, and the parents in order to address the challenges that a high-poverty school faces. What was learned from this study is that through a shift to a leader who understands the community he was serving, change was achieved. If teachers, counselors, and administrators have a deep understanding, along with the resources to support students who are struggling in school due to issues of physical and mental health struggles, then, perhaps, we can prevent students from missing school and encourage them to find academic and emotional refuge at school.

Other culturally sustaining and relevant practices such as pedagogy and curriculum can help bring issues of race, ethnic pride, and sense of belonging to the forefront of the classroom [1,66]. Perhaps a more culturally sustaining curriculum could also reach students who are undocumented and possibly help students feel more connected to teachers and administrators. Kam, Gasiorek, Pines, and Steuber [67] identify diversity in how families and students disclose their documentation status to school personnel. Therefore, schools should be cautious and open to supporting and understanding how to make these families feel supported. School personnel described the benefits of reaching out to families to better understand their individual needs, to establish trust and to assist with services, such as mental health resources [54,55] This study shows us how pullout factors, such as poverty, lead to chronic absenteeism and to the systematic pushout of students of color.

15. Limitations

Participants in this study were not asked what high school they previously attended, and therefore, we could not conduct an analysis comparing different schools, for example, public vs. charter. However, regardless of where students went to school, their stories were very similar. Additionally, because this was an exploratory study, we may not have captured all of the reasons why students leave school. It is important to note that we are reporting the stories from the perception of the students. Future work should talk to parents, teachers, counselors, and other school personnel for a more complex understanding.

16. Conclusions

The goal of this study was to better understand how to prevent a pushout culture. Therefore, educational policy should shape programming that incorporates more emotional support from caring adults, resources to help deal with health disparities, and an incorporation of community voices. This is important for policy making because it provides a tool kit for school districts to train teachers, administrators, and counselors on how to best communicate with parents and students as a means of intervening before students are pushed out of school.

Creating policies that make it easier for teachers to engage in their students' education may decrease the chances of students being pushed out of school and increase the chances of more students of color attending institutions of higher education.

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