An Examination of Student Disengagement and Reengagement from an Alternative High School

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In 2013, just over two-thirds of students graduated from high school in the prescribed four years. The economic and social effects of students dropping out of high school impact the dropouts, their families, and the nation (Dupéré, Dion, Leventhal, Archambault, Crosnoe, & Janosz, 2018; Princiotta & Reyna, 2009; Saddler, Tyler, Maldonado, Cleveland, & Thompson, 2011; U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2015). Effects include lower nominal wages, increased needs for social services, poorer levels of health, and a higher probability of incarceration (Babcock & Bedard, 2011; Lee-St. John et al., 2018; Levin & Rouse, 2012; Western & Pettit, 2010). Family members of dropouts can experience residual effects years after the student makes the decision to leave school (Western & Pettit, 2010; Wildeman, 2010). With forgone taxable revenue, national, state, and local governments can struggle to meet demands for social services, including the support of services that students who drop out of high school may need.

Researchers have examined behaviors of students who have dropped out of high school; however, there are limited studies from the prospective of students who reengaged by enrolling at an alternative high school and then either graduated or dropped out of the alternative school (Balfanz, Bridgeland, Bruce, & Fox, 2015; Lessard, Butler-Kisber, Fortin, Marcotte, Potvin, & Royer, 2008). This study was conducted to provide insight into why students became disengaged from school, and whether placement at an alternative campus affected their decision to graduate or drop out.

Literature Review

Dropping out of school is a process that occurs in stages (Archambault, Janosz, Fallu, & Pagani, 2009). Systemic and campus culture factors can lead to push-out and pull-out factors that can cause students to disengage and drop out. Push-out factors can include zero tolerance policies for high absenteeism and classroom disruptions leading to the loss of classroom instruction (Zhang, Willson, Katsiyannis, Barrett, Ju, & Wu, 2010). Pull-out factors can include parenthood, homelessness, and students' need to work to help support the family (Bradley & Renzulli, 2011; Darensbourg, Perez, & Blake, 2010).

Researchers such as Bridgeland, DiIulio, and Morison (2006) and Hayes, Nelson, Tabin, Pearson, and Worthy (2002) have shown that disengagement is associated with a negative feeling toward school. Bridgeland et al. (2006) examined the experiences of students who dropped out of school in the 2000s: 47% said the classes were not interesting, 69% were not motivated or inspired to work hard, 32% had to drop out to get a job, 35% were failing, 45% said they started high school poorly prepared by their earlier schooling, and 32% said they were required to repeat a grade before dropping out.

Attendance issues may develop during students' transitions between levels of school campuses. The added demands of changes in social structure, academic rigor, and credit requirements make the transition to ninth grade difficult for some students (Felmlee, McMillan, Rodis, & Osgood, 2018; Zvoch, 2006). If a student does not feel like he or she is part of the class or school, then he or she may not feel compelled to attend (Benner & Wang, 2014; Hartman, Wilkins, Gregory, Gould, & D'Souza, 2011). Suspensions in the ninth grade also can lead to lower attendance rates and course failure in later years for some students who otherwise regularly attended and passed their courses (Balfanz & Fox, 2015).

Some students stop attending school as a result of pressure to contribute to their family's financial needs (Stearns & Glennie 2006). Becoming a parent during high school can cause students to feel pulled out of school; however, more than half of students who become parents later resume their education by enrolling in continuing education programs and earning a General Educational Development (GED) certificate (Entwisle, Alexander, & Olson, 2004).

Impacts of Dropping Out

Hayes et al. (2002) and Levin and Rouse (2012) have chronicled that dropping out of high school can reduce political participation and intergenerational mobility, impact levels of health, and increase the probability of incarceration. Local, state, and federal governments lose potential higher tax revenue when students drop out, as dropouts often require increased social services.

Families of dropouts may experience residual effects long after the former student made the decision to drop out (Western & Pettit, 2010; Wildeman, 2010). The spouse and children of former dropouts who are incarcerated may experience a higher instability of family life, divorce, separation, and poverty. Although home life, family, and peer relationships carry great weight in the decision a student makes regarding school, researchers of student engagement have indicated that early identification and reengagement play an equal role in influencing a student's decision to graduate or drop out of high school (Archambault et al., 2009; Boylan & Renzulli, 2014; Henry, Knight, & Thornberry, 2012).

Dropout Prevention and Reengagement

Home life, family, and peer relationships carry great weight in the decision a student makes regarding school, however researchers of student engagement have indicated that early identification and reengagement play an equal role in influencing a student's decision to graduate or drop out of high school (Archambault, Janosz, Fallu, & Pagani, 2009; Boylan & Renzulli, 2014; Gasper, DeLuca, & Estacion, 2012; Henry et al., 2012). Some schools and school districts have invested in early warning systems to monitor student disengagement behaviors such as (a) chronic absenteeism, (b) repeated disciplinary infractions, (c) mandated test failure, and (d) course failure (Balfanz et al., 2015; Sparks, 2013).

Alternative high schools can be a creative solution to help support over-aged and under-credited students as they earn a high school diploma or complete a GED certificate. Alternative schools were created as an option for students who did not fit well within a traditional school

setting. Aron (2006) posited that alternative schools serve students who (a) have fallen off track; (b) have gotten into trouble and need short-term recovery to return back to traditional high school; (c) are about to become parents; (d) have home situations that pull them out of school; (e) are over-aged and under-credited, but are returning to obtain the credits they need to transition into community colleges or other programs; and (f) have been retained repeatedly and are receiving special education services.

Theoretical Framework

Self-determination theory served as a lens for examining how students perceived an alternative high school affected their decision making in relation to their education and future. Self-determination theory involves the study of human motivation in supporting an individual's experience of autonomy (experiencing choice and feeling like one is the initiator of his or her actions), competence (succeeding at optimally challenging tasks and being able to attain desired outcomes), and relatedness (establishing a sense of mutual respect and reliance with others) (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Skinner, 1995). According to self-determination theory, humans are intrinsically and extrinsically motivated to learn (Deci & Ryan, 1985). Self-determination theory defines intrinsic and varied extrinsic sources of motivation as engaging in an activity for the sake of the activity itself and includes a description of the respective roles and types of intrinsic and extrinsic motivation in cognitive and social development (Chen & Jang, 2010; Niemiec & Ryan, 2009; Perry, Liu, & Pabian, 2010). With encouragement, innate motivation can grow, but without purposeful encouragement, it can diminish.

Students who have disengaged from school and are willing to attend an alternative school need to see incremental successes to invest fully in their education (Knesting, 2008; Streeter, Franklin, Kim, & Tripodi, 2011). Self-determination theory is exemplified by educators creating and promoting explicit examples of how students can gain autonomy, competence, and relatedness for their own learning, educational attainment, and earning power (Bloom & Unterman, 2014; Duerden & Gillard, 2011). Ryan and Deci (2000) found that conditions that encourage rather than undermine positive human potential may inform the design of social environments and optimize the development of human performance and well-being. Former students' perceptions in relation to the impact of the alternative school they attended were examined through the lens of self-determination theory.

Research Questions

This study was conducted to address the following research questions:
1. In what ways do graduates and dropouts perceive their alternative high school experiences affected their autonomy?
2. In what ways do graduates and dropouts perceive their alternative high school experiences affected their competence?
3. In what ways do graduates and dropouts perceive their alternative high school experiences affected their relatedness?
4. In what ways do teachers and administrators perceive that the alternative high school students' experiences affected their autonomy, competence, and relatedness?

Methodology

A qualitative phenomenological approach was used to explore the experiences of alternative high school graduates and dropouts with school disengagement and reengagement and to examine how the former students and their teachers and administrators perceived that an alternative high school affected the students' autonomy, competence, and relatedness. The study was designed to explore, record, and analyze lived experiences shared by individuals (Creswell, 2007). Data were collected from persons who had experienced the phenomenon in an attempt to develop a composite description of the essence of the experience of the individuals (van Manen, 1990). Data were collected via questions that pertained to what the individuals had experienced in terms of the phenomenon and what context or situations influenced or affected each individual's experiences (Moustakas, 1994).

Collection of Data

The interview protocol for former students was created using open-ended questions generated from existing student engagement and disengagement literature and the perspective of self-determination theory. The teacher and administrator protocol was designed to help triangulate the responses of the former students. The teacher and administrator interview protocol questions were developed to address how the teachers and administrators built relationships, fostered responsibility for decision making, and offered support to the students at the alternative high school.

Peer experts within the field of dropout prevention reviewed the proposed interview questions and provided feedback. The peer experts worked within the field of student engagement and conducted research in the area of dropout prevention. Questions that the experts believed were redundant or overstated were removed. Questions that were understated were redefined. This process was repeated throughout the development of the interview protocols.

The average enrollment of the alternative campus was only 50 students; therefore, students who had been enrolled at a traditional high school in the school district and then applied to and attended the alternative high school between 1998 and 2014 were identified as possible participants. The school provided contact information for the individuals. A sample of 20 students who had dropped out and a sample of 20 students who had graduated were identified. Alternatively, a student from each group was contacted, asked to participate, and interviewed. The process was continued until data saturated. Prospective teacher and administrator participants were contacted by email. The alternative high school had a staff of 12. The counselor and campus director participated in the study, as did three teachers. All of the staff members who agreed to participate were included in the study.

A total of 15 people were interviewed: 10 student participants (five graduates and five dropouts), three teachers, and two administrators. All of the participants were from one alternative campus. Data were collected via face-to-face, audio-recorded, semi-structured interviews. Participants were interviewed at predetermined sites. Each interview lasted between 45 minutes and two hours. Six of the 10 interviews with the former students were conducted at the former students' places of employment. Four of the locations were restaurants. Other

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locations included offices, an automobile repair shop, apartments, and coffee shops. After the confidentiality statement was read and signed, the researcher and each participant took a few minutes to become acquainted. All but one of the former student interviews went as planned. One former student brought her toddler son to the interview, so the time it took to respond to the questions was extended. The interviews with the staff members were conducted in early fall, when new students were arriving, and new student orientation processes appeared to be fresh on the staff members' minds.

Treatment of Data

The interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed, and coded to determine whether themes emerged and, in an attempt to uncover the essence of the phenomenological experiences of the participants (Creswell, 2007; Moustakas, 1994). Phenomenological research requires repeated readings and step-by-step analysis of each participant's statements to highlight significant statements, quotes, and sentences. The transcripts were coded to delineate between varied responses. Miles and Huberman's (1994) steps to coding were followed. Meaning was assigned to categories during open coding, interview data were organized into categories during axial coding, and themes were extracted from the categories via lean coding (Miles & Huberman, 1994). The themes were used to write a textural description of the participants' experiences and to compose a structural description (Creswell, 2007; Moustakas, 1994). A composite description was formed that presented the essence of the phenomenon (Creswell, 2007; Moustakas, 1994).

The interviews of the teachers and administrators were coded in the same way and were used to triangulate the data from the former students and to attest to the accuracy of the alternative campus application process, the characteristics of the instructional setting, and the impact of goal setting and advisor mentoring on student success. Questions and probes were divided into three distinct groups that aligned with the three parts of self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 1985; Ryan & Deci, 2000). Open coding was used to explore, compare, and sort the data.

Throughout the process, it was essential to have peer review of the data to help to ensure clarity and to prevent bias. Colleagues who worked within the field of student engagement reviewed the data and themes. Transcripts of the data were given to the participants to review for accuracy (Creswell, 2007; Moustakas, 1994).

Findings

There were ten former student participants who ranged in age from 19 to 23. Six were male and four were female. Five of the former student participants were White, four were Hispanic, and one was Asian. The former students had exhibited disengagement behaviors (for example, poor attendance, course failure, test failure, and/or disruptive classroom behaviors) during their high school careers and later reengaged in their education by applying to and attending an alternative high school.

All of the teachers who participated in the study had been teaching high school for ten or more years. All of the staff members who worked at the alternative campus were White. The teacher participants were females, the campus counselor was a male, and the campus director

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was a female. All staff members who agreed to participate in the study were interviewed. The participating campus staff members held advanced degrees and had participated in professional development related to teacher-student relationship building.

The pseudonym *Passages* was chosen for the alternative high school. Passages was established in the 1990s, with a mission to support students who were labeled at-risk for dropping out of traditional district high schools. Passages required applicants to complete a rigorous application and undergo an interview process designed for students who had lost credits due to a significant disruption of their education such as non-attendance, illness, or another life-altering situation. Students could not apply to Passages directly but could obtain a Passages application from their traditional school's counseling office. After the students and parents completed their parts of the application, it was returned to the traditional high school's counseling office for teacher recommendations, then submitted to Passages. Students were eligible to graduate from Passages after they completed all curriculum requirements and passed all mandatory tests.

Five of the former students graduated from Passages and five dropped out. At the time of the study, one of the five former students who had dropped out of Passages had earned a GED. One former student who had dropped out of Passages was taking classes to complete his high school degree and two-year undergraduate degree, one was studying to take the GED, and one was attending a charter school with the goal of completing his GED.

Five themes emerged from the data: (a) relationships rather than programs led to the success of the alternative school, (b) students blamed push-out factors at the traditional school for their disengagement, (c) students exercised autonomy in their choices of whether pull-out factors would impact their decision to graduate or drop out, (d) personalized instruction supported student learning, and (e) one-on-one advising supported students' curricular and life decisions. The first theme, relationships rather than programs led to the success of the alternative school, illustrated students' relatedness, as exemplified by self-determination theory. The former students sought to establish a sense of mutual respect and reliance with others. The second theme, students blamed push-out factors at the traditional school for their disengagement, and the third theme, students exercised autonomy in their choices of whether pull-out factors would impact their decision to graduate or drop out, characterized the segment of self-determination theory that concerns the need of an individual to experience choice and feel like the initiator of his or her actions. The fourth theme, personalized instruction supported student learning, and the fifth theme, one-on-one advising supported students' curricular and life decisions, denoted students' competence, as described in the last section of self-determination theory.

The essence of the phenomenon experienced in this study was one of resiliency. The former students who graduated from Passages and those who earned a GED after dropping out of Passages exhibited tenacity prior to attending the alternative high school. Their persistence was apparent in their willingness to maintain full-time employment while attending high school. Staff at the alternative high school offered support for both the graduates and those who dropped out.

Relationships Rather than Programs

The former students could not recall a program or process at the alternative high school that contributed to their reengagement; however, they attributed the strength of the school to the relationships with the staff and other students. The former students perceived that their relationships with teachers, district staff, and fellow students were supportive and respectful. They spoke about the staff with affection.

Brothers Rick and Jim recalled that an employee, Ms. Martinez, guided them through the application and interview processes. Rick shared that Ms. Martinez told him repeatedly that she would be at his Passages interview and would check on him. "It's more about the way they treat you…like a person, not like one of many….I can't remember programs, but I can remember the people," Rick said. Jim stated, "Ms. Martinez pushed for us because she knew how much we hated going to the [traditional] high school and that if we stayed there we were going to drop out, so it was the only shot we had at graduating."

Cynthia described going to truancy court and the disappointment she felt with herself for her history of truancy and court summonses. She shared that while at truancy court, she decided to change her behavior and made the decision to attend the alternative high school. Cynthia said that her relationships with the staff and district personnel supported her throughout her time at the alternative high school. She shared that she had wanted to attend a school like Passages for years, but that she "didn't even know that there was such a thing."

Repeatedly, the former students spoke about the closeness of the students at the alternative high school and shared how they became a family to each other during their time at the alternative school. Albert described interactions with staff that kept him connected, even though he did not graduate. He shared,

> I met Ms. Martinez in truancy court and she wouldn't give up on me. She came here to my work to try to keep me coming …[the campus director] was always telling my sister to get me to come back.

Tara said that the strength in the campus existed in its people. She said, "I'm still really close with some of them but if it wasn't for going to Passages, I would never have gotten to know them. I don't really remember programs…just…people. That's what makes that place special, the people." Tara's expression of the close bond she was able to build with fellow students and staff at the alternative high school pointed to her reengagement in her education.

Push-out Factors

The former students blamed push-out factors for their disengagement. They described feeling frustrated when they attempted to address issues that caused their disengagement with administrators at the traditional high school and reported feeling uncomfortable approaching counselors or administrators at their traditional campuses with outside life issues that were obstructing their educational goals. The former students described a sense of detachment from the traditional campus as a result of the treatment they experienced from office staff members,

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teachers, and campus administrators, and from a lack of willingness of those individuals to meet with the students and their family members to discuss ways to reengage the students in their education.

Graduates Rick, Jim, and Tara shared that their experiences at their respective traditional high school never matched their expectations. Rick and Jim said that when they attempted to speak with the assistant principal about attendance, the assistant principal called them derogatory names like "losers who don't value education." The students were told that their school-related issues were their fault, and a result of not following the rules or for waiting too long to ask for help. Tara said that she never felt connected with anyone at either of the traditional high schools she attended. She believed that her home situation may have impacted her feelings. Tara stated, "I felt like I was reaching out to them, but they were either not wanting to get close to me because they thought I was going to leave or…it was just too much work."

Some of the issues with the traditional high schools were systemic, such as zero tolerance policies that cause students to be assigned to in-school suspension after a pre-determined number of absences. Other push-out factors described by the former students included repeatedly being assigned to the disciplinary campus and sent to truancy court. The former students shared that these practices led to their course failure, which ultimately resulted in a loss of credits and being retained.

Autonomy in Decision Making

The former students exercised autonomy in their choices of whether pull-out factors would impact their decision to graduate or dropout. They took on adult roles that impacted their education. Some worked 40 hours a week, became parents, and experienced difficulties navigating the educational system to self-advocate for services that could impact their education. The former students said that their parents either were carrying resentment from their own educational system interactions or were overwhelmed with language barriers, financial burdens, drug addictions, mental health issues, or divorce setbacks that hindered them from helping their children navigate the educational system.

Cynthia described how her father's addiction forced her to work full time, which kept her from attending a traditional school. Cynthia served as the supporter of her family and started working at a fast food restaurant when she was 15. Her store manager was aware of her situation, and scheduled her to work for 40 hours a week. Cynthia shared that she was unable to pay attention in class and could not complete homework because she could not concentrate. "That's when I just stopped going to school because it just got too hard. Going to the alternative high school made a huge difference," she said. Scheduling at the alternative campus allowed Cynthia to work and attend school. She shared that during her junior year at Passages, she was allowed to attend school from 7:30 a.m. to 12:30 p.m. so that she could work. On her days off, Cynthia attended school all day. "[Passages] even had a class [for which] I received credit for working," she said.

Rick shared that he made up his mind that he was going to graduate from high school and that the alternative high school was the most logical place to achieve that goal. Rick said that he

and his brother went "from the high school where they ignored you and then sent you to truancy court to the alternative high school where they were way into your business." He said that attending school was "a game I had to play if I really wanted to graduate. I needed to follow their rules, which was better than being back at my old high school, so I did."

Jim said that he was determined to cast off negative perceptions in order to achieve his goal of graduation. He shared that Rick, his brother, committed to attending and finishing school and told Jim that he was sorry he had led him down the wrong path. Jim said, "Man, that hurt. It was my decision to skip when we were at our old school, and I didn't want him to take that on. I decided there and then that I would take whatever [the campus director] dished out, but I was going to graduate."

Albert did not graduate but was motivated to dispel the negative perception that he believed others had of him. He recalled an interaction with a teacher at the traditional high school during the time that he made the decision to leave the alternative high school. A high school English teacher handed out pamphlets that showed the average wage of high school graduates and high school dropouts. Albert said, "I think that's the only thing that motivated me…I thought…even if I do drop out, I'm gonna [sic] make much more than that…I'm gonna prove them wrong." Albert attended Passages for a year, but while there his father kicked him out. "I worked two jobs and went to school, but something had to give. It ended up having to be school. Looking back, sure it would have been great finishing back then, but I didn't have the option," he stated. Albert shared that he had a good job and made "way more money" than the pamphlet said he would. "You know I chose not to go back; I could have easily gone back…but they knew I was a problem child and they just singled me out," he said.

Nina said she did not trust anyone at either school, which led to disengagement and eventual dropping out of school. She shared that teachers at her traditional school were not aware that she acted tired in class because she had worked late the night before:

> They still want me to get up in front of the class to read or something and when the other kids laugh, they don't say anything.…it's hard for us to ask for help and then they just push you and push you and nobody wants to help. I know what to say, we all do. We just say we are going back to Mexico or South America and they leave you alone.

Personalized Instruction

Personalized instruction promoted a positive learning environment at Passages. The Passages teachers and administrators described advocating for student success by assisting students to find the support systems that students needed outside of the school setting and by helping students to manage systemic obstacles to support their educational growth. The former students described how their work was more individualized when teachers created projects that connected mathematics, social studies, and language arts together, which motivated them to apply classroom learning to real-world problems.

The former students described gaining ownership of their learning when they were given the responsibility of teaching what they had learned to other students in their class. Cynthia

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recalled that groups were used at Passages to help students learn to work together. Tara said that she experienced cooperative learning for the first time at Passages. "There was always so much movement and interaction between us students…I really learned how to work with other people," she said. Khalid shared that the alternative school staff members treated him like they wanted him there and that he felt like they wanted him to graduate. "They all wanted to help me. It wasn't like my [traditional high] school," he said.

English was not Khalid's first language. He had attended three high schools in four years. At the second campus, he spent much of his time assigned to in-school suspension due to absences. Khalid shared that he experienced success when he was able to work one-on-one with a teacher at Passages who spent time guiding him through the coursework. Jim said that he was appreciate of how Passages students were assigned large projects and were allowed to "work in teams and all subjects at one time." Students shared knowledge while the teacher served as a guide. "We got to find the answers ourselves and present why we thought what we thought. It wasn't so much about right or wrong, but more about why, and we helped each other understand the why," said Jim.

Although Trey did not graduate, he spoke about the smaller classes at Passages being helpful. Trey said that when he enrolled at Passages he was about a year and a half behind his peers, not counting a credit and a half he felt he had earned but had not received. Trey shared, "Because I was able to work on my stuff and not what they were teaching at my old school, I earned most of the credits I needed. That's what smaller classes do for you."

Advisors

One-on-one advising at the alternative high school served as a support for the former students in their decision making in school and in their personal lives. The former students shared that the alternative school advisors helped them navigate their remaining time in high school and that the additional support received via this relationship provided an opportunity to discuss life issues such as being a parent, working 20 or more hours a week, and developing and managing goals.

Rick believed that his advisor cared for him on a personal level. He said that the advisor, "kept me on track and all, but he told you more about how things applied to life. So, if you did something stupid on the weekend, he let you know how stupid that was." Albert described how his advisor was also his work-study teacher. After Albert dropped out of Passages, his advisor visited him at his job to encourage him to return to school. According to Albert, the advisors "get to know you on a one-on-one level…and…show more attention than they do at a normal high school."

Tara shared that her advisor was the first person to point out that if her traditional campus had provided her with paperwork for homeless students, she might not have ended up at Passages. Tara said that the advisor suggested that she "use every experience to move forward, somehow," and that was when she "first thought about attending college to study social work." Cynthia recalled the helpful, at-ease relationships with her advisor and with other teachers. She

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said that she could talk with them about both school and home issues. Cynthia shared what was going on at home with one teacher in particular:

> She knew all the problems with my house…how the struggle was to go to school. I'm the first one to graduate from high school and I'm the first one to attend college, so I didn't know what to do, so they helped me go to…college seminars. They told me what classes to take my first semester, what I should do, what I should be looking for in college.

Cynthia's advisor relationship carried over from school to her home life. She sought guidance and reassurance from her teachers for her decisions and for the goals she was setting for herself after high school.

Jim described the relationship he and his advisor shared as collaborative. He said that his advisor treated him like an equal:

> At the beginning, I really didn't want to talk, so she would just sit and wait for me to feel comfortable with her. It took a couple of weeks of us meeting almost every day, but then I realized she was for real. When I talked about going on to community college, she told me what steps I had to take. She walked me through things step by step.

The majority of former students felt that the assistance provided by Passages advisors went beyond coursework support and that the advisors helped them set and achieve goals for school, work, and life after school. The former students credited advising relationships with helping them to reengage in school. The students were helped to find their voices and learn to test relationships in a safe environment.

Discussion and Implications

This study confirmed the research of Balfanz et al. (2015), who found that relationships impact students' capacity for growth. The former students found support at Passages through relationships they built with staff members and fellow students; however, it was their personal persistence that moved them forward. The teachers and administrators described how their role as educators was to support students' success by dismantling systemic obstacles within the educational sphere and by helping students find networks to support their needs outside of school. Students' feelings of connection to their school can stem from building relationships with caring adults who can offer support (Bloom & Unterman, 2014; Boylan & Renzulli, 2014; Freeman et al., 2015).

The former students credited the success of their alternative school experiences to relationships forged, not to programs or processes. The teachers and administrators believed that meeting the students where they were and guiding them in an overt way positively influenced student success. Campuses should be designed as spaces for students to work with peers and participate in small-group instruction. Doing so can lead to higher student achievement and increased graduation rates (Booysen & Grosser, 2014; Slaten, Irby, Tate, & Rivera, 2015).

Whether they were graduates or dropouts, all of the former students described feeling disengaged or pushed-out from their traditional high school. The former students were able to pinpoint when they became disengaged from school. They described making a decision not to follow a school or home rule that took the decision to stay in school out of their hands. The former students shared that they were pulled out of school by the need to work and cited family issues or friends as contributing to their decision to graduate or drop out of school. Whether they graduated from or dropped out of the alternative school, they appeared to take ownership of most of their decisions and actions.

Disengagement behaviors such as skipping school or disrupting class can be warning signs that a student may be about to leave school. Districts must develop early warning systems for all grade levels, assist campuses in the implementation of these systems to monitor disengagement behaviors, and design interventions to support students who are in need. Students should only be removed from direct instruction for extreme situations, and there should be an appropriate instructional recovery plan for every student who is removed from the classroom.

The former students found support for their decision making at the alternative school via personalized instruction and one-on-one advising. The alternative campus staff worked to develop relationships to nurture students during their time at the school. The teachers and administrators described that even when they had a room filled of students, providing one-on-one instruction supported student learning. The teachers spoke about how fulfilling it was to see students succeed after they had faced so much adversity while at their traditional high schools.

The teacher and administrator participants attributed part of the success of the alternative campus to its small size. Prospective students were required to submit an application and participate in an interview with the director and counselor. The process helped staff regulate the number of students entering the school and ascertain whether prospective students realized that they were responsible for their actions.

Recommendations for Further Research

The former students took on adult roles that impacted their education. They described pull-out factors that led them to seek alternative education. While attending the alternative school, adult roles caused some participants added stress that they were unable to overcome. Further research is needed to explore how to support students who take on adult roles. Although researchers such as Karcher (2008), Rhodes (2008), and Rodriguez-Planas (2012) have found that mentoring leads to a greater connectedness to culturally different peers for elementary boys and high school-aged girls, additional studies are needed to examine the relationship between mentoring and student academic outcomes and their impact on high school students.

Summary

While students across the U.S. are graduating at higher rates, some students continue to drop out of high school. The purpose of this phenomenological study was to explore factors for school disengagement and reengagement using the lens of self-determination theory. The former students in this study exhibited resiliency. The tenacity of the former students who graduated and

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those who earned a GED after dropping out of the alternative high school appeared to drive them to pursue their educational goals.

The former students perceived that relationships between staff members and students were key to the alternative high school's success. They believed that push-out factors at the traditional high school caused their disengagement, and that they exercised autonomy in their choices of whether pull-out factors would impact their decision to graduate or drop out. The former students shared that personalized instruction and peer-to-peer learning encouraged them to own their learning and taught them to respect fellow students and teachers. They perceived that one-on-one advising supported their learning and decision making outside of school.

The teachers and administrators described how deliberate planning for student success and the advisee/advisor relationship contributed to students' decisions in and out of the classroom. Although the teachers and administrators shared that they created a path for the former students to complete the necessary coursework required to graduate from high school, the staff members said that they understood that the students were ultimately responsible for following through by attending school and completing assigned work. While the former students found support at the alternative high school through the relationships, they built with staff members and fellow students, it was their own persistence that moved them toward success.

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