

Mattering is Motivating: Special Education Students' Experiences with an Online Charter School

DELAINA TONKS
Mountain Heights Academy
delainatonks@gmail.com

ROYCE KIMMONS
Brigham Young University
roycekimmons@gmail.com

STACIE L. MASON
Brigham Young University
stacie_mason@byu.edu

In the United States, K-12 special education students are increasingly enrolling in online schools in hopes of improved opportunities and outcomes. In this study, researchers interviewed five special education students enrolled in a targeted online school along with their parents to better understand their motivations for enrolling and their experiences of what worked for them in the unique setting. Students and parents explained how their prior schools had not worked for them and how the online school better met their needs for self-determination, mattering, differentiation, and positive socialization. Results are intended to inform policymakers and stakeholders in online schools to provide the best learning opportunities for special education students.

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MATTERING IS MOTIVATING: SPECIAL EDUCATION STUDENTS' EXPERIENCES WITH AN ONLINE CHARTER SCHOOL

Online (or virtual) K-12 schooling in the U.S. has grown substantially since the 1990s (Barbour, 2017; Molnar et al., 2015). In 2018-2019, full-time public online schools operated in 32 U.S. states, and 375,000 students attended these schools (Digital Learning Collaborative, 2020). In addition to full-time online enrollments, state virtual schools served 1,015,760 course enrollments, and the number of students taking supplemental online courses through other providers (companies, universities, non-profit organizations, and school districts) was estimated to be several million (Digital Learning Collaborative, 2020).

Online schools tend to attract students whose needs were not being met in traditional brick-and-mortar schools (Digital Learning Collaborative, 2020; Woodworth et al., 2015), including students who qualify for special education services under the Individuals with Disabilities in Education Act (IDEA, 2004). These students and their parents may be drawn to a variety of perceived benefits associated with online schools, including improved safety, flexibility, convenience, and learning opportunities (Ahn, 2011; Barbour & Reeves, 2009; Beck et al., 2014; Cavanaugh et al., 2004; Hasler-Waters et al., 2014; Hassel et al., 2004).

Among parents, students, and educators involved in online learning, Basham et al. (2015) found that most stakeholders believed that online learning has the potential to meet special needs of students with disabilities. However, researchers have also found that students most likely to succeed in online schooling tend to be “academically capable, motivated, independent learners” (Barbour & Reeves, 2009, p. 402; see also Ahn, 2011; Ahn & McEachin, 2017). To help the increasing numbers of special needs students in online schools succeed, educators must understand and prepare to meet these students’ needs (Rice et al., 2019).

Little research exists regarding the motivation and experiences of special education students in online schools (Barbour & Reeves, 2009; Burdette et al., 2013; Cavanaugh, Barbour, & Clark, 2009; Ferdig & Kennedy, 2013; Molnar et al., 2015; Rice & Dykman, 2018; Vasquez & Serianni, 2012). The purpose of this study was to understand parents’ and students’ motivations and experiences in an online school in order to learn more about what might make an online school more inclusive. We conducted a qualitative study by interviewing five special education students along with their parents. Two questions guided the research for this study:

1. Why did special education students enroll in an online school?
2. How were students’ particular needs being met (or not met) in their online school?

METHODS

To answer our research questions, we conducted a case study involving one school, using an explanatory mixed-methods design (Creswell, 2008). In this paper, we share data collected from interviews with students and parents. In a separate paper, we discuss quantitative survey data gathered prior to the qualitative portion (Tonks, Kimmons, & Mason, in press).

Context

Yorkshire Academy (pseudonym), is an online secondary school established in 2009 “to use innovative technology, service learning, student-centered instruction, and personal responsibility to empower students to succeed” (School, 2016, para. 1). This school focused on maintaining the teacher’s role as teacher, mentor, and content expert, leveraging Open Educational Resources (OER) to make content universally available and also adaptable to individual student needs.

Though meeting the unique needs of special education students was not initially a central tenet of Yorkshire Academy, the school attracted many students with special needs who began thriving in the online setting. In eight years, the percentage of students with special education classifications steadily increased from 3.9% in 2009 to 15.4% in 2017—2 to 4% higher than the state average (National Center for Education Statistics, 2017). Of these special education students, 93.7% were in one of three specific subsets of the special education population: (a) autism (8.6% above state and 7.2% above national averages), (b) specific learning disability (6.9% above state and 22% above national), and (c) other health impairment (8.2% above state and 8.5% above national).

Previous surveys of the school’s general student population showed that students generally selected the school because (a) they had not done well in their previous educational setting, (b) they valued the flexibility of fitting school around their own schedule, and (c) they enjoyed their interactions with their teachers (Swinton, 2017).

Data Collection and Analysis

This study was conducted with the approval of the sponsoring university’s Institutional Review Board and utilized common approaches to participant informed consent and assent. We narrowed the potential interviewees to the school’s three prevalent special education classifications (autism, other health impairment, and specific learning disability) and then utilized purposeful sampling, commonly used in qualitative research (Patton, 2002), to identify the parent/student pairs most knowledgeable about the special education program at Yorkshire Academy and those who would be able to

provide an information-rich experience (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011). As part of the purposeful sampling, 14 parent/student pairs were identified who fit the information-rich criteria (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011) within the special education classifications. All 14 pairs were asked to participate in the interviews, but not all of them were interested in or comfortable with the invitation, so they declined. For seven of the pairs, either the parent or the student was interested, but not both. Seven pairs were interested, so we reviewed parent gender, student gender, student grade level in school, student age, length of time at the school, and special education classification and selected four parent/student pairs with the greatest amount of variety in the distribution characteristics mentioned previously for a more balanced perspective. As a result, we interviewed a more diverse group of families: three female and one male parent, three male and two female students, ages 15 to 18 in grades 9 through 12. Consistent with Kvale's (2006) recommendation to separate the research from the interview questions, we avoided theoretical terminology and designed questions to elicit responses at a level that would be comfortable and understandable for each participant. In each interview, the interviewer (the lead researcher) asked the student or parent why they had chosen the target school and what their experience had been at the school. She also asked multiple follow-up questions, such as "Tell me about your least favorite school experience here," to enhance accuracy and to better understand participants' experiences.

After transcribing the data, we employed an efficient "lumping" method (Saldaña, 2009, p. 19). Rice and Carter (2015) used this procedure in their interview work with virtual school educators. The method results in broad, general macro-themes: for example, lumping together prior negative educational experiences and other reasons for selecting an online school. Inviting two additional online educators into the process to assist with categorizing responses into macro-themes, in addition to reviewing the thematic categories decreased bias potential and enabled peer debriefing of results. During the second cycle of coding, the researcher and the additional online educators used the more refined process of "splitting" (Saldaña, 2009, p. 20), which split lumped themes into more nuanced subthemes. For instance, the general theme of negative student experiences in prior educational settings was split into specifics including bullying, health issues, and perceived lack of staff support (Table 1). We engaged two colleagues during the third cycle to ensure that the final themes and subthemes accurately represented transcripts to ensure consistency, accuracy, and thoroughness. Each researcher individually reviewed the data and themes, offered feedback, and requested clarification. We then met in person and adjusted the final themes and subthemes until consensus of the three reviewers was achieved.

Table 1
Sample Interview Codes with Examples

Negative Student Experience	
Sub-Theme	Example Comment
Bullying	"I got bullied a lot."
Health Considerations	"He had been having increasing anxiety surrounding going to school."
Lack of support	"Weeks would go by with her not understanding what was going on, not getting the help she needed."
Positive Student Experience	
Sub-Theme	Example Comment
Differentiation	"The teachers, they interact with you, ... they tailor the lessons or the subjects to [the students'] needs"
Mattering	"It meant that somebody was noticing who he was as a person."
Self determination	"It helps that I can say, 'I need a five-minute break here.'"
Socialization	"What I like best is all the activities."
Supportive teachers	"That teacher just hung in there with her ... and kept thinking of different ways that she could explain it"

Rigor

Researchers employed the following specific practices to ensure qualitative rigor in the study: (a) utilizing purposeful sampling for informants, (b) asking open-ended and follow-up questions to encourage interviewees to tell their own stories, (c) triangulating results with multiple data sources (i.e., parent and student survey with interview transcripts), (d) engaging in frequent peer debriefing with colleagues, (e) interviewing parents and students separately to reduce bias and suggestion, (f) comparing parents' and students' perspectives of the same experiences (e.g., bullying instances), (g) revealing and acknowledging influence of our own positionality on subject matter and participants, (h) utilizing email member checks of transcripts and emergent themes following interviews to ensure clarity and accuracy, and (i) providing "thick descriptions" in the write-up to ensure accurate representation of participant voices.

Positionality

The first author of this study was principal of the online school; the second and third authors were university researchers unassociated with the school. Thus, the lead researcher had been involved in advocating for

special education students and safeguarding their educational well-being. This involvement provided her with many insights and advantages in conducting this study, which was beneficial, but required that she carefully consider how her role and position affected ways she carried out the research, which was challenging at times. Sensitivity and acknowledgement of limited objectivity were required, but one of the benefits of her position enabled her to interview parents and students who had developed strong positive relationships with her over time, allowing them to be more comfortable sharing their experiences with her than would be possible with an unknown third party. One of the challenges of her position may have been a tendency to view the student experiences through a more positive lens as an advocate of online learning and special education. As a measure of balance and accountability, the second and third authors had no prior experience with the school. They served as objective outsiders who challenged the first author's assumptions and assessed the validity of her interpretations in terms of the evidence. With these contrasting positions creating balanced tension, we were able to capitalize on existing participant relationships and insider knowledge of student and parent experiences and school culture without losing methodologically valuable doubt and outsider skepticism. We consider this counter-positioning to have contributed to a final study that was authentic and well positioned but also critical and analytic.

Participants and Family Contexts

Treating each participant as a critical informant, we interviewed them individually to ensure that both parent and student voices would be heard. To personalize the experiences of each participant and to help track individual stories within their family contexts, we assigned alphabetized pseudonyms (e.g., Allison is the mother of Ashley, and their last name is Anderson; see Table 2).

Table 2
Participant List of Pseudonyms

Family Name	First Name	Gender	Role
Anderson	Allison	F	Parent
	Ashley	F	18-year-old student
Brown	Benjamin	M	Parent
	Brady	M	15-year-old student
	Brinley	F	15-year-old student
Carter	Cassandra	F	Parent
	Cameron	M	16-year-old student
Davis	Danielle	F	Parent
	Drake	M	17-year-old student

Since both parent and student interviews lasted between 45 and 75 minutes, a \$25 gift card was provided to compensate participants for their time. The three families interviewed at the school office were provided with an appropriate mileage reimbursement; the fourth was interviewed via video conference. Interview recordings were transcribed by a third-party service for later analysis. Interviewees included two female and three male students between the ages of 15 and 18, in addition to one male and three female parents. Students represented the percentages of the school population for their disability classifications of autism, specific learning disability, and other health impairment.

FINDINGS

All nine interview participants communicated the idea that their prior schools had not worked for them and the online school better met their needs. In explaining how online school better met their needs, interview responses coalesced around four main themes: (a) *self-determination*, having a voice in available educational options and agency matters such as time management and scheduling; (b) *mattering*, assurance that teachers and other school staff genuinely care; (c) *differentiation*, content and learning experiences adapted to individual student needs via open curricula; (d) *socialization*, opportunities to engage in meaningful social relationships with peers. Parents and students described a variety of challenges, including specific courses, distance from planned social events, and increased independence and responsibility for learning. In this section, each of these themes is explored in more detail, including parent and student comments as well as thick descriptions to authentically illustrate participant attitudes, experiences, and beliefs.

Previously Unmet Needs

Students and parents in our study communicated beliefs that student needs were not being met in prior school settings. Either a specific event or persistent general dissatisfaction had led to a search for something different. Most parents were motivated by fear of long-term consequences, such as their student being unable to graduate, while the students focused more on immediate outcomes like teacher or peer relationships. The students may not have understood the information motivating the parents toward the decision to change schools: for example, negative interactions with school administrators or unanswered requests for assistance from teachers.

The Andersons had explored every schooling option available, including homeschooling, district schools, private online schools, and online charter schools. When Allison realized that what had worked for her five sons

was not working for her two daughters, she began specifically looking for a learning environment where Ashley could mature a little more before being in a brick-and-mortar junior high. Ashley seemed more concerned about treatment by the teachers and fellow students. She shared, “I heard that the local high school wasn’t really great. The teachers weren’t very helpful. The kids were kinda mean.”

Benjamin explained that he looked for a new option for his children because their seventh and eighth grade IEPs had indicated that they were not on track to graduate. He wanted them in a setting where they could succeed and graduate. Both his son Brady and daughter Brinley felt that they were not getting the help they needed academically. Brady explained,

I got bullied a lot with my speech problem, and I got teased a lot with my disabilities. ... So, my mom figured [we] should look for a new school. And then I wasn’t getting a lot of help with my disabilities.

Said Brinley, “It was just like the content was harder, and they didn’t explain it in a way that I could understand.” Furthermore, Brinley had a very specific health problem that required frequent access to the bathroom, which she had been regularly denied.

While both of the Browns’ students were not happy when told they would not graduate, the immediate problems of being bullied and having an urgent need for the bathroom denied seemed more pressing to the children, while the long-term consequences of not graduating were more critical in seeking an alternative option, in Benjamin’s opinion. Though perspectives differed within and between families, Yorkshire Academy provided options for these families to determine for themselves what they wanted from schooling and how they would apply what was available to them.

Self Determination

One way in which Yorkshire Academy enabled self-determination was in scheduling. Brady explained,

I get to pick what schedule I can do. ... It’s very flexible with your schedule. ... All the homework is due by Friday, so you can make your own schedule with that. ... If you’re at home and you’re sick, you can still go to school. And you can sometimes do it on the road.

Brinley’s specific health problems had caused her to miss school often in her previous setting, so she was happy to have the flexibility of working from home when she needed to do so.

Drake Davis had been attending an online school that was using curriculum not aligned to required assessments, which school personnel felt no responsibility to review. Danielle disagreed: "I didn't know what I was going to do, and then I saw an ad for Yorkshire Academy, and it was like every prayer had been answered. ... I knew what he needed." Her primary motivation was finding a school that could provide the academic support her son required; Drake was searching for a more flexible option that he could do from home.

To accommodate his desire, Danielle wanted to give Drake more control over his scheduling, but this was initially more difficult than she expected:

Our first year ... was phenomenal. Not so much for Drake, but for me as a parent! It took some adjustment for him, and he didn't do well. Last semester ... he ended up with all D's.

Yet this struggle was only temporary, and Danielle was pleasantly surprised with the end result:

Instead of kind of blowing up and getting upset and raising a ruckus ... the teachers said (and I took my cue from them as well), "Okay this isn't working so let's let him fall and experience it." I had to let go of the idea that I wanted him to have a scholarship for college and be okay with the outcome and let it be his. And that made all the difference. He picked it up and he said, "You know what? I want better for myself. I don't like how this feels." And last term he got all A's. From one term to the next ... he's gained confidence ... in online school that he never could have in a public environment.

Danielle worked with the teachers to allow Drake to experience the results of his decisions. He needed to see what he could and could not do on his own with the hope that he would take ownership of his own learning.

Drake explained what changed between his first and second years:

I get to choose [the] hours...[Early on] I have about half an hour to myself where I take the dog out ... play a little game, or record a video, and then at 9, I do statistics for an hour. At 10, I do English for an hour. At 11, I do forensics. ... And then I take a lunch break ...[then] I'll get to either history ... or financial literacy ... for an hour. That tides me over until 2, and then I usually practice ukulele for 10 minutes and get ready to go to my seminary class at my local high school. ... It helps that I can say, "I need a five-minute break here." The schedule is a guideline; it's not a strict "you have to do this now and

never again if you miss it.” It says you have to take statistics for an hour, so I take statistics for an hour. Whether it’s at 9 or at 3, I do it for an hour. And I try and stick with the schedule, but sometimes you have to make adjustments ... like a five-minute break [and I can] make up that five minutes later.

This self-determined schedule allowed Drake to adopt an approach to schooling that worked for him. He was able to develop self-management strategies to keep himself motivated and moving forward. He also noted, “Another thing I find is, reward yourself if you can get everything done ... [work] until lunch then ... take a break, play a game, watch a TV show.”

The combination of Danielle ceding control of Drake’s schedule, enabling him to take charge of it himself, even if that meant allowing him to fail, enabled Drake to exercise his agency in determining how to design his school day. He seems to have developed better time management skills that allowed him to work in blocks of time, as well as better motivational strategies to reward himself for task completion. Being able to choose his schedule and his learning process allowed him to develop a better set of study habits, which seems to have led to greater success, as evidenced by straight A’s this last semester.

Likewise, Cassandra explained that the flexibility provided by online school was an advantage for her son Cameron.

[Cameron] recognized, I think, in the beginning that it was going to be better. He had the flexibility that he needed, and ... [although the year was] difficult, [he had] access to a teacher anytime. ... And he didn’t get that sitting in a classroom full of 33 kids that can’t be quiet.

Cameron corroborated this point, explaining that at his prior school the teacher often erased the board and moved on before Cameron had absorbed the material. He was grateful that at Yorkshire Academy he could get help and review material as needed.

I know that if I need help, I can go get help, and I won’t be stuck below grade level. If I have questions I can go back, I ... re-watch it; I re-read it. ... I’m getting something out of it.

Parents in all four participating families anticipated the long-term effects of their students remaining in their previous setting, while the students were more concerned about immediate consequences from bullying, poor teaching, and lessons that did not meet their unique needs. Having decided to find a different educational option, they enrolled at Yorkshire Academy where the students could implement principles of self-determination by setting the how, when, and where of their own learning.

Mattering

The strong theme of mattering was emphasized by parents who felt they had not been supported or listened to at their students' former school. At Yorkshire Academy they felt support and concern for both themselves and their children. They perceived that their students were visible and that the staff cared deeply about each individual's success, regardless of learning needs or other differences.

Danielle explained that teachers were available throughout the day, not teaching classes with rotating groups of students; teacher time was spent working with individual students. Danielle appreciated frequent communication on Drake's status and timely availability to work with him when he needed teacher assistance—both of which she saw as evidence of mattering:

Mattering is really individual. ...When Drake starts slipping in one of his classes, his teachers reach out ... I don't find out three months down the road at a parent conference that he's so far behind he is never going to catch up. I'm getting emails, he's getting emails and they're saying, "Hey, what's going on, what do you need, how can I support you?" ... This ability to create time during office hours is much more akin to real life. ... He matters absolutely the right amount [to the teachers], and he gets the kind of attention that ... every kid should be able to get in school.

Similarly, Benjamin equated teacher attention and assistance with the caring and mattering his two children needed. Having struggled with learning himself, with high school teachers who did not believe in him, he was taking his children's education seriously. He was immensely relieved when he learned from the team at Yorkshire Academy that Brady and Brinley were on track to receive diplomas, provided that they continued to work hard each year. He explained,

[Hearing that] they couldn't graduate was really heartbreaking for Brin and Brady ... one day I picked them up [and] they [said,] "Guess what happened? They told me I'm not going to graduate. What's up with that?" ... I was struggling there for a little bit, [wondering] where can I turn to, because you want your kids to be successful, you know? ... [My children] are going to accomplish things, they are going to graduate and have a successful life. So, when [Yorkshire Academy told me] that the [children] could graduate with the tutoring and all the available resources ... and that someone cares out there, that they believe in them, that they can do this, this [was] awesome!'

Benjamin gave specific examples of how teachers showed that Brady and Brinley mattered: “They communicate just by their availability, their times they make themselves available, even for parents [to be] able to call. ... I just see them interacting and reaching out every day.” He mentioned the time teachers were taking to review for tests: helping the students learn how to think without giving them the answers.

Allison noted teachers’ attitudes demonstrating that Ashley mattered to them as an individual. Like Danielle, she contrasted Ashley’s experience in a large brick-and-mortar setting to the individual help she received from teachers at Yorkshire Academy.

She was having real difficulties. In one of her classes, I spoke to the teacher. ... He probably had 300 students. His method was... “Go ask a peer for help.” Ashley tried that and she ... couldn’t find anybody who wanted to help her. ... Weeks would go by with her not understanding what was going on, not getting the help she needed. ... I’ve been a teacher myself; I know how busy they must be. [But at Yorkshire Academy] I never felt like Ashley hit a wall and there was nowhere for her to go, there was no way she could keep moving forward—that that was just it. ... I’ve always felt like there were people [here] who were really interested in helping her succeed and finding a way to make it work.

From her frame of reference, Allison identified teacher time spent with Ashley as one way to communicate that she mattered to her teachers.

Cameron likewise cited teacher accessibility and responsiveness as evidence of mattering. Cameron felt that in his previous school, expectations were not clear and his teachers did not understand why he struggled with his work. He contrasted the two school situations:

I didn’t like being in a class of 30 where I’m sitting there, not knowing what to do or what is expected of me and then turn around and have people [say] ... “This person’s stupid. He doesn’t do it. He doesn’t know how to do it.” [In this school] if I have questions, I can just contact my teachers and [say], “Hey, can you help me real quick?” “Oh sure, let’s do it” ... I felt like I was in the shadows for the longest time. ... [This school] brings me out into the light.

Cassandra extended this mattering to events and activities, specifically discussing the school’s annual gala. One year, Cameron received awards for being the top student in two classes. She explained what this meant to Cameron:

[The awards] hang on his wall, and he knows that who he is matters, because he didn't [solicit] those awards. ... They just happened. ... He may not ever say this, but to him, that meant more than anything that's ever happened. ... [I]t meant that somebody was noticing who he was as a person, that what he was doing was important, that he was making a difference. ... Those first two awards ... shaped how he looked at himself and gave him confidence that "yeah, this was hard ... but it was worth it, because look what I have out of it." Mattering is motivating.

Cassandra continued,

You don't know what kind of an impact you're having on these kids The reward is going to come later, when they look back and [say], "Because you believed in me, I didn't give up. I kept trying, because I felt like what I was doing made a difference." ... I don't remember what I did in fifth and sixth grade, but I remember [how] my 6th grade teacher made me feel. And that matters.

Thus, mattering must focus on how teachers make students feel about themselves, their possibilities, and their futures. Cassandra admitted that this does not make school easy, but it makes it doable and worth doing.

[Yorkshire Academy school staff] care about Cameron's education. They care about where he is in the process, especially with having an IEP. They care about his progress, making sure that they're setting things at his level to get him to progress.

For special education students who have felt lost, forgotten, abused, or demoralized in previous school settings, having personnel who genuinely care for, believe in, and set high standards for them makes them feel like they matter and motivates them to succeed.

Differentiation

The specialized design, hiring practices, and culture of Yorkshire Academy enabled differentiation for the needs of each student. As a former homeschool parent, Danielle knew the difficulty of creating a curriculum, giving her great respect for teachers who could adapt curricula to student needs. She recognized that Drake needed a school with a flexible, standards-aligned curriculum that could be adapted to his needs, with teachers who would hold him accountable.

You've put together a group of teachers that really care, but also they hold students to a higher standard, which I should mention is one of my favorite things about the school. ... They care, and they are not going to accept poor work.

Cassandra was similarly looking for a setting where Cameron could have access to grade-level curriculum but with modifications and scaffolding he needed to achieve grade level in reading and math—aware that time would be required. She had evaluated two other online schools before hearing about Yorkshire Academy.

So, the other two schools that we had been looking at didn't have the ability to change the curriculum, or that's what they told us. ... I tried to explain that by age, yes, he is in seventh grade, but he still reads on a second or a third-grade level, and he's not on grade level math, and I have an IEP... [but] it was "No. We can't do that. ... He has to be on grade level."

Cassandra was concerned that Cameron was performing below grade level and that each night she was spending three hours after his eight-hour school day trying to help him get caught up to his peers. She also felt his IEP was useless: "terribly written" and "terribly modified" and not being followed. When enrolling Cameron at Yorkshire Academy, the IEP case manager adapted the IEP to the online setting, implemented appropriate accommodations, and worked with Cameron's teachers to adapt his curriculum to meet his needs. Cassandra explained,

[The case manager] understood each piece [of paperwork] and followed it, ... and I was like, "So you really read it? You really read it?!" She's like, "Of course I read it. This looks great..." She was enthusiastic about him, and where he'd been and what progress she felt he could do. She was realistic ... but [enthusiastic]. She challenged him ... she didn't give him a pass. She just recognized where he was, where she felt he could be, and gave us a very clear, definitive path.

Once Cameron's accommodations were in place, the case manager and the teacher made adjustments to motivate him to try his hardest and to do his best work. Cassandra explained,

That first couple of progress reports that we got from her were full of ... nothing but accolades for him, and he exploded with ... "I want to try harder for her. She said I can do it." ... He didn't believe that in himself, but when she believed it in him, she made him feel that he could.

The case manager continued to work with all of Cameron's teachers on the reading level of his curriculum to make occasional accommodations, to tier and adjust the content appropriately, and to help Cameron progress weekly.

Cassandra also valued how Cameron's teachers recognized that Cameron's learning differently could be a good thing.

Knowing how hard everything was for him before, and how it's still hard, but he's different, in such a good way. It really has made a difference to us and our family ... because [the school] recognized that there could be something different. ... Children are different and that's okay.

Cameron appreciated the time his teachers spent working to find solutions specifically for him. He commented about his IEP,

Because of my IEP I feel like my assignments are harder. Like combined into two, and they're harder and they're worth something where I can just go and do. ... They're worth just making sure I get everything right. ... I don't slip up, because I know what I need to do. I know how I need to do it.

The students' involvement in the development and implementation of the IEP was appreciated by the students and the parents.

Another parent, Benjamin, also appreciated differentiation for his children, specifically mentioning "notes and videos that [teachers] have tailored to their needs." When asked about the experiences that benefited them, he highlighted the curriculum, the teachers' ability to adapt in order to personalize for his children, and teachers' attitudes of caring about them and being willing to work with the family to help the students succeed. He explained,

I know with [one teacher], she's like, "I'm working on better videos, you know, for them so that they can understand a little bit better."... And she's even open to suggestions from me. ... The teachers, they interact with you, they tailor to fit your needs, they tailor the lessons or the subjects to [the students'] needs.

Allison had a similar experience with teachers accommodating to Ashley's specific needs.

I appreciate the flexibility and the accommodations ... because [Ashley] does have challenges with processing speed and retention and mental fatigue. I think maybe the problem is that they were expecting six hours a day at the [previous school], and that's just not possible with Ashley.

Allison specified,

She has real short-term memory issues....You can remind her of something and 30 seconds later it could just be gone. But her teachers have just worked with that and not assumed that she's not being honest or that she's just making up excuses or she's not trying. ... There have been times where she just [can't go on] ... for a day or sometimes even two or three, but they are willing to open up assignments for her again, just re-visit things that maybe they already went over several times before.

Allison gave a specific example of how an English teacher gave Ashley individual attention to write an essay. "That teacher just hung in there with her ... and kept thinking of different ways that she could explain it, different ways that she could help Ashley keep moving forward incrementally." Allison felt Ashley would not have graduated from a traditional school. Similarly, each family shared at least one in-depth example of a teacher customizing their students' learning experience by presenting the material in a different way or by adapting the OER to be more palatable for the student, contributing to a meaningful educational experience for each family.

Socialization

A counter-intuitive theme emerging from the interviews was the perception of access to positive social opportunities afforded by this online school. In their previous schools, the students in our study had experienced negative socialization. Brady had experienced teasing and bullying. When Ashley needed academic help at her previous school and her teacher told her to ask a classmate, Ashley did not feel that any of her classmates would want to help her. Prior to online school, Cameron had been the "odd man out," feeling like he was consistently "living in the shadows."

In online school, these students' experiences were much more positive. Students participated in clubs, activities, and even dances. Brinley explained, "What I like best is all the activities ... I like to go to prom. ... I hang out with this one kid named Carter ... We went to a dance together."

Brady had comparable experiences:

What I like about the school is the clubs. ... I have a fitness club that I went to and we went to the skating thing. ... I like the food bank stuff, too ... and your parties. And you can text your friends and meet up with them or something.

Cameron also noted, “The thing that does really hit home is the friends.” He explained, “There’s other kids in here that have the same thing that I have [his learning disability] or that are divorced children. ... I have a lot to connect to with them.” Cameron’s particular attitude toward friends was that “you meet new people each time and your community with other people just grows bigger and stronger.” Having come from a negative social situation, Cameron now seemed to feel an obligation to personally shepherd other students through the social experience.

He observed that the online setting provided students with a layer of anonymity to relieve the social pressure of making a mistake.

If you mess up, everybody lives somewhere else. So, you don’t see them on a daily basis ... you can be yourself, and you can just be funny. ... You don’t know everybody [online] so ... you just don’t worry about it. ... I’ll make sure that [people at parties] feel welcomed and everything. ... [This school] changed my life, so why can’t I change other people’s lives as well?

Regarding the switch to an online school, some parents mentioned initial concerns about their students spending too much time on a computer and not having a social life; however, Benjamin noted how his viewpoint changed.

Outside activities, for example, [included] sign language clubs ... they met at libraries and they also did a play. ... [Brady] really liked that.... When he started doing those things I overcame that [initial concern]. ... And then the gala [end of year awards ceremony] ... [it] is always fun to interact with teachers.

Benjamin was also impressed by the amount of online interaction that took place involving students with counselors, teachers, and peers: “There’s more interaction [online]. ... There’s live chat rooms, there’s live people that could actually talk to you on the screen, and that’s what I liked about it.”

These student and parent perspectives suggest that learning online does not need to be isolating for special education students. Rather, in many ways it can be liberating to them by giving them more opportunities and varied means for social interaction and by giving them a layer of anonymity to develop social skills that are not on daily display, so they can recover social slips privately and have time to build up confidence and try again.

Although students and parents described mostly positive social experiences, they also noted challenges. Because the school draws from a large geographical area, connecting in person was difficult. Danielle said, “the social piece of course is the hardest part of all of this and ...you guys do a good job of putting stuff together, but the fact of the matter is, ...driving to and from [school activities] is challenging.” She wished there were local parent groups and suggested that a student directory (which the school already had but she was unaware of) would be helpful.

Challenges

When asked to describe their experiences or describe the school, students and parents gave responses that were largely positive, but they also shared challenges. When asked about their least favorite experiences at the online school, most students cited unique concerns. Three students mentioned specific classes that they had found difficult, and one student said that essay writing was the worst part of school. Ashley said that school had gotten harder as she had gotten a job and other commitments. She also mentioned that she had had a problem with the school laptop so had switched to using her personal computer.

Cameron, Drake, and their parents observed that the first year had been difficult. As previously indicated, both boys had struggled at first with taking responsibility for their own learning and completing required work. Once they had established routines and taken ownership of school work, both boys’ confidence and grades greatly improved.

Other than the first-year transition, parents’ accounts of negative experiences did not show clear patterns. As noted previously, Benjamin had worried that his children would spend all their time on a screen and lack social interaction but had been pleasantly surprised. Danielle said she would appreciate more lenience with deadlines: “it’s hard when your kid is working as fast as they can and they have a 6:02 deadline or they turn a paper in at 6:02 and they lose 20 points.” Allison said she would like to be able to better monitor what her daughter was doing online, which was a concern she had also had with previous online schools. She also noted that there were certain subjects—choir and drama—that her daughter participated in elsewhere rather than online. Cassandra pointed out that parents need to be involved in their children’s online school, or the child could choose not to do the work and then fail their classes, as a family friend had done. She further cited a particular class that had been difficult and frustrating for Cameron, in which the teacher had not responded quickly to questions. These responses indicate a variety of challenges for students, parents, teachers, and administrators in online schools.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

As stakeholders institute policies and practices to educate students with special needs, we must listen to and acknowledge students' lived experiences. This paper shares the voices of five students and their parents. This study was small, so that the findings may not be generalizable; more research is needed to investigate student motivation and experiences, and more student voices need to be heard. This study did not include students who had chosen to leave the school. The students interviewed had been at the school at least a year; their experiences had been mostly positive and successful. It is possible that because the interviewer was the school principal, students and parents may have held back certain criticisms and been generous in their praise. As a research team including two researchers unaffiliated with the school, we have attempted to present a balanced, authentic picture, quoting students and parents as much as possible. Despite the limitations of the study, we hope that the findings will help other educators and researchers to understand motivating factors that draw families to online schools.

In summary, interview results coalesced into four main themes regarding motivations to attend and experiences with the online school. These included (a) *self-determination*, having a voice in educational options; (b) *mattering*, feeling like staff and teachers care about students and their parents; (c) *differentiation*, combining teacher know-how, technical ability, and open licensing to personalize curricula to individual students; and (d) *socialization*, providing safe, meaningful social opportunities to students. This section presents implications of each of these themes for the practice of special education, particularly online.

First, students and parents want a say in students' educational experiences. In our study, parents and students desired a stronger voice in student learning, both at the macro (school choice) level and at the micro (day-to-day scheduling) level. Parents wanted a better overall situation for their children than they could find in traditional settings, and students found benefit and a sense of power in being able to structure their own schedules to accommodate their specific needs for learning, health, and well-being—from self-regulating their motivation by watching a rewarding YouTube video to being able to go to the restroom when needed. This finding is consistent with research showing that flexibility and agency were driving factors behind states offering and families choosing online education (Ahn, 2011; Burdette et al., 2013; Hasler-Waters et al., 2014). Based on these previous findings combined with our own, one practical implication is that online schools should be flexible and provide students options in what, when, where, and how students learn.

Second, mattering is motivating. All of the families described their feelings that the students and their parents mattered to teachers and other staff at Yorkshire Academy, in contrast to treatment they had received in previous face-to-face and online settings. Personnel at this school were available and responsive, working with students, adapting curricula, understanding and using IEPs, and assisting parents. Beyond simply feeling good, this mattering brought hope and motivation to students who struggled to remain engaged in their learning and were at risk of not graduating. Other researchers have found that mattering—feeling valued, needed, and wanted—is important to young people’s motivation and social and mental health (Dixon & Tucker, 2008; Raque-Bogdan et al., 2011; Tucker et al., 2010). These findings and our own suggest that online schools need to show all students that they matter. Teachers and case managers can do so by being available to students, really listening to them and their parents, and ensuring that IEPs are appropriate and are followed. Online school personnel should recognize that lack of motivation they perceived in special education students may have little to do with grit, determination, or ability, but more to do with how students perceive themselves to be valued by others; if mattering is motivating, then the perception of not mattering conversely breeds hopelessness and disengagement.

Third, to meet the needs of special education students, teachers must adapt curricula to differentiate instruction. All of the families interviewed were keenly aware that teachers had adapted curricula to meet student needs. Teachers were able to do so because they had the necessary background and training, were assigned a reasonable student load, and utilized curricular materials that were licensed for adaptation. Canned or copyright-restricted online curricula, inadequately trained teachers, and unreasonably large student-to-teacher ratios that are prevalent in many online settings (Burdette et al., 2013; Hasler-Waters et al., 2014; Molnar et al., 2015) likely prevent teachers from differentiating instruction for individual students. Stakeholders should work to ensure that teachers are both allowed and equipped to adapt curricular materials to their students’ needs.

And fourth, online learning need not be socially isolating for special education students. In our study, the social opportunities afforded by the online school resonated with all students. The online nature of the school engendered a sense of safety for students who were developing prosocial behaviors and figuring out social norms; also, intentional efforts by the school to create positive social interactions via clubs and parties helped students to develop and enjoy positive social lives. As Watson and Gemin (2008) noted, 21st century students are very used to digital socializing, and online learning is well-situated to “foster interaction and collaboration among a diverse

and geographically dispersed group of students” (p. 5). Unfortunately, many online schools seem to neglect this important piece, never allowing students to interact with one another either online or offline, citing safety considerations as reasons for such disconnection. Such policies contribute to online students often feeling isolated, and these feelings of isolation contribute to student attrition (Ali & Smith, 2015; Allen & Seaman, 2013; Brown, 2012; Croft et al., 2015; McInnerney & Roberts, 2004). The students we interviewed craved social interaction, and their parents wanted them to develop social skills in spaces free from bullying and abuse. Learning is a social experience (Bandura, 1978; Vygotsky, 1962), and positive social connectedness has been shown to improve adolescents’ mental health and academic outcomes (Bond et al., 2007). All of these findings suggest that online schools can contribute to their students’ development, well-being, and academic success as they couple safety with intentional social opportunities.

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