

ANALYSIS OF AN ALTERNATIVE HIGH SCHOOL'S GRADUATES AND
DROPOUTS: A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY

by

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Abstract

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In 2013, just over two-thirds of students graduated from high school in the prescribed four years. Some students continued to attend traditional high schools for a fifth year; others entered an alternative high school and earned a high school equivalency certificate, qualifying them as completers. Some joined the workforce or dropped out of school altogether. Other students enrolled in an alternative high school during the prescribed four years and either graduated on time, graduated in their fifth year, or dropped out.

In this phenomenological study, deciding factors for school disengagement and reengagement were explored, via self-determination theory, by examining how former students perceived that their alternative high school experiences affected their autonomy, competence, and relatedness. Interviews were conducted with 10 former students (five graduates and five dropouts), three alternative education teachers, and two alternative school administrators. The themes that emerged from the data included: (1) relationships rather than programs led to the success of an alternative high school, (2) students blamed

push-out factors at the traditional high school for their disengagement, (3) students exercised autonomy in their choices of whether pull-out factors would impact their decision to graduate or drop out, (4) personalized instruction supported student learning, and (5) one-on-one advising supported students' curricular and life decisions. Further studies are needed to examine whether increasing the capacity of alternative campuses would assist in student success, or if part of the success of alternative high schools comes from limiting the number of students served on a campus.

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Chapter 1

Introduction

Public education in the United States was built on educating the masses (Hartman, 2008). As an institution, the U. S. educational system has evolved and outside parties such as industry, federal, state, and local governments and religious institutions have exerted agendas onto schools, adding another challenge to efforts to graduate all students (Moran & Vinovskis, 2008).

Many students in the PK-12 system have met the increased educational standards set before them; however a portion of the student population would not or could not reach the requirements (Hartman, 2008). Although there is an abundance of research on student behaviors from researchers who explored the process of student disengagement from school (Benner & Graham, 2009; Bowers, Spratt, & Taff, 2013; Lessard, Butler-Kisber, Fortin, Marcotte, Potvin, & Royer, 2008), there is a lack of understanding of why students become disengaged in the first place. This study was conducted to provide insight into why students became disengaged from traditional high school and to examine their perceptions of the effect an alternative high school had on their decision to either graduate or drop out.

This study included an exploration of the perceptions of former alternative school students, teachers, and administrators. The lens of self-determination theory was used to examine student disengagement and reengagement factors. Data were collected from 15 former students who graduated from or dropped out of an alternative high school, three alternative school teachers, and two alternative school administrators.

Growth and Development of Public High Schools

Elementary-level education was the norm in early America (Moran & Vinovskis, 2008, p. 31). In 1821, the Boston Commonwealth created the first all-male English high school in an effort to assist the area's non-college-going male children in the increasingly commercial 19th-century economy (Moran & Vinovskis, 2008, p. 31). By the 20th century, a new, progressive education movement dominated classroom methods and the purposes of school (Reese, 2001). Hartman (2008) suggested that industry led the push for vocational education in high school for graduates to fill jobs in factories that fed the economy and built the middle class. Segregation and later desegregation brought new scrutiny to the governance of schools (Rumberger & Palardy, 2005). *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954) led to court orders and federal legislation in integrating mainly large urban school systems through both voluntary school choice programs and busing of students from racially diverse areas into predominately White schools (Armor, 1995; Frankenberg, Lee, & Orfield, 2003; Rossell, 1990). Battles between local control over schools and federal legislation directing schools intensified during desegregation (Armor, 1995; Frankenberg et al., 2003; Rossell, 1990; Rumberger & Palardy, 2005).

Congress enacted the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) of 1965 as part of President Johnson's war on poverty campaign, creating Title I funding for school districts with a high concentration of low socioeconomic students (U.S. Department of Education, 1965). The intent behind ESEA was to reduce the achievement gap between student groups by affording each child fair and equal opportunities to receive an exceptional education (LeFloch, Taylor, & Thomsen, 2006). In 1983, *A Nation*

at Risk was released by a commission comprised of federal and state educational leaders, business leaders, and governors who had been directed by the U.S. Secretary of Education to examine the quality of education in the U.S. (National Commission on Excellence, 1983). The result was the first set of federal standards in English, mathematics, science, social studies, computer science, and foreign language for all students (National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983). Although these standards were developed and agreed upon by a commission directed by the U.S. Secretary of Education, the commission was not authorized to mandate a state or federal standard or mechanism to test whether or not students were meeting the standards (National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983).

ESEA was amended in 2002 and reauthorized as No Child Left Behind (NCLB), establishing statewide accountability systems to measure academic effectiveness of schools and school districts by utilizing disaggregated data collected from standardized examinations, grade promotion, and high school graduation ascertained by criterion-referenced exams and mandated severe sanctions on districts and school who failed to meet Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) (Hursh, 2005). Researchers have suggested that as a result of NCLB, school districts that serve minority students and students who live in poverty have lower accountability scores and ratings, which lead to sanctions for not reaching state and federal standards (Cruse & Twing, 2000; Heilig, Santoro, Doucet, Garcia, Tierney, Baker, & Irizarry, 2011; LeFloch et al., 2006; McNeil, Coppola, Radigan, & Heilig, 2008; Payne, 2009). Other researchers have posited that standardized

exams are unreliable and an invalid method for assessing student achievement (Giambo, 2010; Harris, Irons, & Crawford, 2006; Hursh, 2005).

Framing Who Drops Out

Historians have chronicled the growth and development of public high schools since the mid-1950s (Moran & Vinovskis, 2008). While the public school system has experienced success in graduating the masses, there have been difficulties in graduating all students (Hartman, 2008). Hartman's (2008) work focused on the educational system and labor. Hartman (2008) quoted a counselor who spoke at a conference in the late 1940s who spoke about boys who were housed in a juvenile penal institution for delinquents. The boys who were assigned to the institution had dropped out of high and committed heinous crimes. The boys told the counselor they left school because "the stuff was not interesting," "the teachers were dull," and "the work had nothing to do with what we wanted to be" (Hartman, 2008, p. 68).

Bridgeland, DiIulio, and Morison (2006) reported similar responses from 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 school, 45% started high school poorly prepared by their earlier schooling, and 32% said they were required to repeat a grade before dropping out. Since 1990, researchers increasingly have reported that disengagement is associated with a negative feeling toward school (Bridgeland et al., 2006; Hartman, 2008; Hayes, Nelson, Tabin, Pearson, & Worthy, 2002).

Balfanz, Bridgeland, Bruce, and Fox (2013) noted that each year, 20% of U.S. students drop out, particularly economically disadvantaged students, students of color, and those who receive special educational services. Since the mid-1970s, researchers have documented the importance of completing high school. Hayes et al. (2002) and Heckman, Humphries, Veramendi, and Urzua (2014) found that those students who graduated from high school had improved health and an increased likelihood of social and economic futures compared to those students who dropped out. Additionally, according to Levin and Rouse (2012), Moretti (2007), Muenning (2007), Rouse (2007) and Waldfogel, Garfinkel, and Kelly (2007), students who graduate from high school had a lower incarceration rate compared to those who dropped out (Levin & Rouse, 2012; Moretti, 2007; Muenning, 2007; Rouse, 2007; Waldfogel et al., 2007).

Federal Education Legislation and Accountability

In the early 2000s, federal education legislation increased accountability standards for students in the PK-12 system (U.S. Department of Education, 2001). In response to this legislation, leaders in PK-12, higher education, government, and industry advocated for national definitions of *graduate*, *completer*, and *dropout* in order to clarify and enhance data collection. In 2005, the National Governors Association (NGA) agreed that in order to accurately account for graduates and dropouts at the national level, states needed a standard method of accounting of graduates and dropouts (Chapman, Laird, Ifill, & KewalRamani, 2011; Curran, 2005; Linn, Baker, & Betebenner, 2002; Stetser & Stillwell, 2014). Many leaders in PK-12, higher education, government, and industry have concurred that the goal of the PK-12 system is to graduate all students and that the

role of federal, state, and local entities is to support that effort (Chapman et al., 2011; Curran, 2005; Linn et al., 2002; Stetser & Stillwell, 2014). To reach this goal, these same leaders agreed upon a set of standards to use to count and report high school graduates and dropouts (Chapman et al., 2011; Curran, 2005; Linn et al., 2002; Stetser & Stillwell, 2014). As of 2010, 22 states utilized common definitions for high school graduate, completer, and dropout in order to account for students (Almeida, Steinberg, Santos, & Le, 2010; Chapman et al., 2011; Curran, 2005; Linn et al., 2002; Stetser & Stillwell, 2014).

In 2013, 80% of students graduated high school in the prescribed four years (Balfanz et al., 2013). Although this percentage had increased from the mid-70% range in the previous decade, 20% of students still were not graduating on time (Balfanz et al., 2013; Barton, 2009; Bridgeland et al., 2006; Chapman et al., 2011). These students either returned to a traditional high school for a fifth year, entered an alternative high school program, earned a General Educational Development (GED) certificate, joined the workforce, or dropped out of school or work altogether (Balfanz et al., 2013).

Statement of the Problem

Benner and Graham (2009); Bradshaw et al. (2008); Christle, Jolivette, and Nelson (2007); Henry, Knight, and Thornberry (2012); and Janosz, Archambault, Morizot, and Pagani (2008) found that dropping out of school is not an isolated occurrence, but a process of disengagement that begins early in a student's educational career. Since 2005, the national dropout rate has declined to an average of 20% (Balfanz et al., 2013; Barton, 2009; Bridgeland et al., 2006; Chapman et al., 2011).

Researchers from the National Dropout Prevention Center compared national high school graduation rates to graduation completion data and found that 4 million students entered ninth grade in 2008, but four years later only 2.9 million graduated (Balfanz, Bridgeland, Bruce, & Fox, 2012). Over 1 million students did not graduate from high school with their respective cohort within the prescribed four years. The economic and social effects of this number affect individuals and the nation (Hayes et al., 2002; Princiotta & Reyna, 2009; Saddler, Tyler, Maldonado, Cleveland, & Thompson, 2011).

For the individual, the effects of dropping out of high school include earning a lower nominal wage, an increased need for social services, a poorer level of health, and a higher probability of incarceration (Anderson, 2012; Babcock & Bedard, 2011; Freudenberg & Ruglis, 2007; Heckman et al., 2014; Hjalmarsson, 2008; Levin & Rouse, 2012; Marmot, Rose, Shipley, & Hamilton, 1978; Moretti, 2007; Muenning, 2007; Pavetti & Acs, 2001; Rouse, 2007; Sweeten, 2006; Waldfogel et al., 2007; Western & Pettit, 2010; Woolf, Johnson, Phillips, & Philipsen, 2005). Dropping out of high school also has consequences for the dropout's family unit. Members of a dropout's family may experience residual effects years after the former student's decision to leave school was made (Comfort, 2007; Western & Pettit, 2010; Wildeman, 2010). The spouse and children of adult dropouts who have experienced incarceration may contend with the instability of family life, divorce, separation, and poverty (Comfort, 2007; Western & Pettit, 2010; Wildeman, 2010).

Dropouts contribute less to the tax base than graduates, leaving national, state, and local governments with less funding to meet the demands for social services

including the support of services that students who drop out may require to survive.

Dropouts also may experience an increase in crime and antisocial behaviors and a poorer level of health (Hayes et al., 2002; Heckman et al., 2014; Levin & Rouse, 2012; Moretti, 2007; Muenning, 2007; Rouse, 2007; Waldfogel et al., 2007).

Research has been conducted to examine behaviors of students who have dropped out of high school (Anderson, Leventhal, & Dupéré, 2014; Balfanz et al., 2013; Barrington & Bedard, 2011; Barry & Reschly, 2012; Bowers & Sprott, 2012b; Bradley & Renzulli, 2011; Cavazos & Javier, 2010; Christle et al., 2007; Doll, Eslami, & Walters, 2013). Researchers have not brought to light the specific challenges of students who disengage from an alternative school (Pekrun, 2006). Research is lacking that reveals students' perceptions of why they first become disengaged from school (Benner & Graham, 2009; Bowers et al., 2013; Lessard et al., 2008). Particularly lacking are studies from the perspective of students who reengaged by enrolling at an alternative high school, then either graduated from or dropped out of an alternative school (Lessard et al., 2008).

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to explore deciding factors for school disengagement and reengagement via self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 1985; Deci & Ryan, 2000; Niemiec & Ryan, 2009; Ryan & Deci, 2000). Students' perceptions were examined in terms of how an alternative high school affected their autonomy, competence, and relatedness.

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, Janosz, Fallu, & Pagani, 2009; Balfanz, Herzog, & MacIver, 2007; Barrington & Hendricks, 1989; Boylan & Renzulli, 2014; Edwards & Edwards, 2007; Gasper, DeLuca, & Estacion, 2012; Henry et al., 2012; Janosz et al., 2008; Lessard et al., 2008). This study focused on the life experiences of students who had become disengaged and then reengaged by attending an alternative high school. 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.

Interviews were conducted with students who either graduated from or dropped out of an alternative high school at a school district located in the southwestern United States. Interviews also were conducted with two teachers and one administrator from the alternative school. The former students who were interviewed had exhibited disengagement behaviors (for example, poor attendance, course failure, test failure, and/or disruptive classroom behaviors) (Balfanz et al., 2013) during their high school careers and later reengaged in their education by applying to and attending an alternative high school. Some of the former students reengaged in their high school education and went on to graduate; others dropped out. Self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 1985) was used as a lens to examine which, if any, factors within an alternative high school contributed to students' decision to graduate or drop out of school.

Research Questions

To accomplish the purpose of the study, the following research questions were explored:

1. In what ways did graduates and dropouts perceive that their alternative high school experiences affected their autonomy?
2. In what ways did graduates and dropouts perceive that their alternative high school experiences affected their competence?
3. In what ways did graduates and dropouts perceive that their alternative high school experiences affected their relatedness?
4. In what ways did the teachers and administrators perceive that they supported the alternative high school students' growth toward increased autonomy, competence, and relatedness?

Theoretical Framework

Human beings can be proactive and engaged or, alternatively, passive and alienated largely as a function of the social conditions in which they develop and function (Ryan & Deci, 2000). This is the framework for self-determination theory. Self-determination theory is the study of human motivation in supporting the 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; deCharms, 1968; Deci, 1975; Harlow, 1958; Skinner, 1995; White, 1959). Students who have disengaged from school and are

willing to attempt attending alternative high school need to see incremental successes in order to fully invest in their education (Knesting, 2008; Lagana-Riordan, Aguilar, Franklin, Streeter, Kim, Tripodi, & Hopson, 2011; Streeter, Franklin, Kin, & Tripodi, 2011).

Self-determination theory posits that humans are intrinsically and extrinsically motivated to learn (Deci & Ryan, 1985). With encouragement, innate motivation can grow, but without purposeful encouragement, it can diminish. Self-determination theory allows educators to create and promote explicit examples of how students can gain autonomy, competence, and relatedness for their own learning, educational attainment, and earning power (Bloom & Unterman, 2014; Deci & Ryan, 1985; Duerden & Gillard, 2011). 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; Gillard, 2010; Niemiec & Ryan, 2009; Perry, Liu, & Pabian, 2010). The theory also includes a focus on how social and cultural factors facilitate or undermine a person's sense of volition and initiative, in addition to his or her well-being and the quality of performance.

Self-determination theory posits that without intentional support for the inherent psychological needs within the social context, there can be a harmful effect on wellness within that social context (Deci & Ryan, 1985; Fredricks & McColskey, 2012; Taylor, Lokes, Gagnon, Kwan, & Koestner, 2012; Thornton & Sanchez, 2010). 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. Perry et al. (2010) found that teacher support had a direct effect on the school engagement of the urban youth they studied. Ryan and Deci (2000) described an intrinsically supportive teacher as a catalyst for students' curiosity with the desire to challenge students' limits and a more controlling teacher as one who does not encourage students to initiate learning, thus not allowing students to gain autonomy and competence.

This study included an examination of disengagement and reengagement factors and former students' perceptions of how an alternative high school affected their autonomy, competence, and relatedness in terms of decision making regarding their education and future. Although this study focused on self-determination theory, other theories such as critical race theory and push-out and pull-out theories are discussed in the student disengagement literature. Critical race theory challenges the foremost liberal ideas of colorblindness and meritocracy and demonstrates how these ideas function to disadvantage people of color while further advancing their White peers (Davila & de Bradley, 2010; Solorzano, Villalpando, & Oseguera, 2005). Push-out and pull-out theories add to our knowledge of why students leave school. *Push-outs* are students who lag behind their grade level peers due to overrepresentation in disciplinary placements and special education placements (Boylan & Renzulli, 2014; Bradley & Renzulli, 2011; McNeal, 1997). *Pull-outs* are students who are removed from school by outside forces such as the need to work (Boylan & Renzulli, 2014; Bradley & Renzulli, 2011; McNeal, 1997).

Significance of the Study

Dropping out of high school is an event that can impact a person's earning power and increase an individual's probability of requiring social services and participating in criminal and anti-social behaviors (Anderson, 2012; Babcock & Bedard, 2011; Heckman et al., 2014; Hjalmarsson, 2008; Levin & Rouse, 2012; Waldfogel et al., 2007; Western & Pettit, 2010). Researchers 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 (Hayes et al., 2002; Heckman et al., 2014; Levin & Rouse, 2012; Moretti, 2007; Muenning, 2007; Rouse, 2007; Waldfogel et al., 2007). The negative effects of dropping out of high school include a higher probability of earning a lower nominal wage, having an increased need for social services, experiencing a poorer level of health, and having a higher probability of incarceration (Anderson, 2012; Babcock & Bedard, 2011; Heckman et al., 2014; Hjalmarsson, 2008; Levin & Rouse, 2012; Waldfogel et al., 2007; Western & Pettit, 2010). Local, state, and federal governments lose potential higher tax revenue when students drop out, as dropouts often require increased social services (Hayes et al., 2002; Heckman et al., 2014; Levin & Rouse, 2012; Moretti, 2007; Muenning, 2007; Rouse, 2007; Waldfogel et al., 2007).

Families of dropouts may experience residual effects long after the former student made the decision to drop out (Comfort, 2007; 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 (Comfort, 2007; Western & Pettit, 2010; Wildeman, 2010). Dropping out can result in reduced political

participation, intergenerational mobility, and lower levels of health (Hayes et al., 2002; Heckman et al., 2014; Levin & Rouse, 2012; Moretti, 2007; Muenning, 2007; Rouse, 2007; Waldfogel et al., 2007).

Although there is an abundance of research on student behaviors that signifies disengagement from school, there is a lack of understanding of why students become disengaged from school in the first place (Benner & Graham, 2009; Bowers et al., 2013; Lessard et al., 2008). This study provided insight into why students became disengaged and their perceptions of how an alternative high school affected their decision either to graduate or drop out.

This qualitative, phenomenological study was constructed to capture the perspectives of students who had experienced disengagement at their traditional high school, then experienced reengagement by attending an alternative high school and who either graduated from or dropped out of the alternative high school. Data from the participants were sought to capture the former students' perceptions in order to provide a deeper understanding of how students perceived that their alternative high school experiences affected their autonomy, competence, and relatedness. Additionally, interviews were conducted with alternative high school teachers and administrators in order to help triangulate the student data.

The former students described building relationships at the alternative high school, whether or not they graduated. They perceived that the relationships they built mattered. The former students described push-out factors at the traditional high school, which they blamed for their disengagement, and pull-out factors, which they believed

accounted for their decisions to drop out. The former students expressed the importance of feeling challenged and succeeding with the help and support of caring and knowledgeable adults. While there have been many studies of self-determination theory (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Deci & Ryan 1985; deCharms, 1968; Harlow, 1958), this study explored deciding factors for school disengagement and reengagement and students' perceptions of how an alternative high school affected their autonomy, competence, and relatedness in relation to their education and future decision making.

Method

Qualitative research is grounded in interpreting vivid accounts, maintaining linear flow, and extracting abundant explanations of events that lead to the further inquiry of human study (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Qualitative researchers are key instruments in data collection; they observe behaviors of participants during the interview process to gain a detailed understanding of an issue (Creswell, 2007). Qualitative research focuses on the stories behind the numbers that quantitative research provides; qualitative research represents a mode of social and human science exploration, fostering a contextual understanding of an issue and providing insight into individuals' actions (Creswell, 2007; Marshall & Rossman, 1999).

This qualitative study employed a phenomenological approach in order to present an in-depth look at the perceptions of alternative high school graduates and dropouts. The study was designed to explore, record, and analyze lived experiences shared by individuals via their voices (Creswell, 2007). The phenomenological approach includes describing what participants have in common as they experience a phenomenon and

exploring the personal experiences of the participants. Phenomenology is concerned with an individual's perception of an event (Smith, 2007). The researcher analyzes collected data, highlighting significant statements, sentences, or quotes that provide an understanding of the participants' experience of the phenomenon, allowing the essence to emerge (Dahlberg, 2006; Moustakas, 1994; Zahavi, 2003). Moustakas (1994) described *essence* as the meaning of one's own experiences; within phenomenological research, the essence of the phenomenon is a composite of the structural and textual descriptions from all participants combined.

Collection of Data

Data collection for a qualitative, phenomenological study consists of focusing on small groups of individuals (no less than five and up to 25 participants) to obtain rich, in-depth data (Creswell, 2007; Dukes, 1984). Morse (1994) suggested that at least six participants are needed to explore a phenomenon, whereas Smith (2007) did not believe that it was helpful to think in terms of sample size. According to Smith, the researcher should focus on purposive sampling in order to define more closely the group for whom the research question is most significant. For this study, a total of 15 people were interviewed: 10 student participants (five graduates and five dropouts), three teachers, and two administrators. Data were collected through a series of face-to-face, audio-recorded, semi-structured interviews (Creswell, 1998). Interview locations and times were agreed upon at the recruitment stage Literature on student disengagement and reengagement (Archambault et al., 2009; Balfanz, Bridgeland, Bruce, & Fox, 2015; Boylan & Renzulli, 2014; Bradley & Renzulli, 2011; Swanson, 2009) and the perspective

of self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 1985) framed the open-ended questions used in the interview protocol.

Treatment of the Data

The interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed, and coded in an effort to determine whether themes emerged and in an attempt to uncover the essence of the phenomenological experiences of the participants (Creswell, 2007; Miles & Huberman, 1994; Moustakas, 1994; Smith & Osborn, 2007). Phenomenological research requires repeated readings and step-by-step analysis of each participant's statements to highlight significant statements, quotes, and sentences (Creswell, 2007; Moustakas, 1994). The transcripts are coded using a system to delineate between varied responses. Responses from each participant are combined to explore similar experiences (Creswell, 2007; Moustakas, 1994). The researcher develops *clusters of meaning* or related formulated meanings from these statements and explores the data for any themes that emerge (Creswell, 2007; Moustakas, 1994). The themes are used to write a *textural description* of the participants' experiences and to write the context, or setting, called *imaginative variation* or *structural description* (Creswell, 2007; Moustakas, 1994). The researcher forms a composite description that presents the *essence* of the phenomenon (Creswell, 2007; Moustakas, 1994).

Throughout the process, it is essential to have peer review of the data to help to ensure clarity and to prevent bias (Creswell, 2007; Moustakas, 1994). 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).

Definitions of Terms

The following definitions helped to guide this study:

Alternative high school

An alternative high school is a public high school comprised of faculty and staff members who have a goal of educating students who are labeled at-risk for dropping out of school or who have already dropped out of high school, as well as those students who are labeled over-aged and under-credited. The purpose of the school is for students to graduate with a high school diploma or a GED certificate (Franklin, Streeter, Kim, & Tripodi, 2007; Hemmer, Madsen, & Torres, 2013; Kim, 2013; Lagana-Riordan et al., 2011; Lehr, Tan, & Ysseldyke, 2009; Streeter et al., 2010; Tyler & Lofstrom, 2009).

Autonomy

Autonomy concerns a sense of well-being, perceiving the ability to choose one's course of action and experience ownership of those actions (deCharms, 1968; Deci, 1975; Deci & Ryan, 1985).

Competence

Competence involves succeeding at optimally challenging tasks and being able to attain desired outcomes (Deci & Ryan, 1985; Skinner, 1995; White, 1959).

Completer

A completer is a student who did not graduate in the traditional four years, enrolled in either a public or private high school for a fifth year or longer, and completed

either all required high school credits, a certificate program, or a GED program (Chapman et al., 2011).

Dropout

A dropout is a student who left school sometime during seventh through twelfth grade; did not return to school the following fall; was not expelled; and did not graduate, receive a GED certificate, continue school outside the public school system, begin college, or die (Chapman et al., 2011).

Graduate

A graduate is a student who completed high school within the prescribed four years (Chapman et al., 2011).

Relatedness

Relatedness concerns establishing a sense of mutual respect and reliance with others, including feeling connected and a sense of belonging with other individuals and with one's community (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Deci & Ryan, 1985; Harlow, 1958).

Limitations

The following were limitations of this study:

1. There was no recourse to address individuals who may not have responded truthfully.
2. The study's findings are not inclusive of all variables that can affect an individual's educational career trajectory.
3. Findings from interviews may not be able to be generalized to other alternative schools.

Other forces such as resentment toward the traditional high school, feelings of loyalty to the alternative high school, and a need to defend personal choices could have impacted former students' responses. The director is not required by the district to document the annual number of applicants to the alternative high school or the number of students who are not accepted, therefore no documentation was available to verify the high success rate.

Delimitations

The following were delimitations of this study:

1. The former students who participated in the study were from one school district.
2. The teachers and administrators were from one alternative school in a southwestern state.

The ten former students, three teachers, and two administrators who participated in this study were from one alternative school. The school was assigned the pseudonym *Passages*. The former students had been out of school between one and 15 years.

Assumptions

In a phenomenological study, results are dependent on the candor of the participants (Moustakas, 1994). In this study, the following assumptions were made.

1. The former student participants became disengaged in school and enrolled in the alternative high school.
2. The participants responded truthfully.

The former student participants either had graduated from or dropped out of school at least one year prior to the time of this study. All of the participants seemed to express candor during the interviews.

Role and Background of the Researcher

I serve as the director for student engagement at a mid-sized PK-12 school district in the southwestern United States. My role is to ensure that students from pre-kindergarten through twelfth grade stay on the path to graduation. My initial job interview was for an assistant principal position, however, I was offered an opportunity to create a role at the district level that at that time did not exist. At the time of my employment, the overall graduation rate was 95% and trending downward; the overall district attendance rate was only slightly higher. I was assigned the responsibilities of increasing attendance rates district-wide and reversing the downward trending graduation rates at the alternative and traditional high schools.

In my role, I utilized research from the National Dropout Prevention Center (Edwards & Edwards, 2007) as a guide for how to prevent students from leaving high school early and as a roadmap for how to assist students to return after they left. I met with students and families to determine causes for disengagement and then planned how to reengage students. Often plans included changing students' schedules to shorten the school day, placing students into a credit recovery program, transferring students to another high school for a fresh start, or moving students to an alternative high school.

Addressing attendance was a much larger endeavor. I assembled a team of assistant principals to create a truancy prevention measure and initiated the conversation

by introducing data that captured the number of days and types of absences that affected students' engagement. Rather than responding after attendance became an issue for students, we established proactive partnerships with families to address challenges that might cause students to miss school. I met with campus administrators to focus on specific attendance issues and with students, parents, and campus staff to discuss obstacles that affected student attendance. These past experiences have provided me with opportunities to apply best practices prescribed by subject matter experts.

Organization of Dissertation Chapters

Chapter 1 provided an introduction to the study. Chapter 2 is comprised of a review of the literature, which affords the foundation needed for the understanding of the overall issue of student disengagement and dropout behavior. Chapter 3 contains the research method. Included in Chapter 4 is a description of the findings. Chapter 5 includes study conclusions; implications for research, practice, and theory; and recommendations for further research.

Chapter 2

Review of Literature

There were over 1 million U.S. students in 2008 who did not graduate high school in the prescribed four years (Balfanz, Bridgeland, Bruce, & Fox, 2012). Push-out factors such as repeatedly being sent to a disciplinary campus and pull-out factors such as having to work 30 to 40 hours a week while in school can affect the engagement of high school students (Boylan & Renzulli, 2014; Bradley & Renzulli, 2011; McNeal, 1997).

Push-outs are students who lag behind their grade level peers due to overrepresentation in disciplinary placements and special education placements (Boylan & Renzulli, 2014; Bradley & Renzulli, 2011; McNeal, 1997). *Pull-outs* are students who are removed from school by outside forces such as the need to work (Boylan & Renzulli, 2014; Bradley & Renzulli, 2011; McNeal, 1997). Attending alternative high school is one option available for students who are unsuccessful in or choose not to attend a traditional high school (Aron, 2006; Carver, Lewis, & Tice, 2010; Kellmayer, 1995).

Self-determination theory involves the intrinsic and extrinsic motivation in supporting the human basic need for freedom to control one's own learning (Deci & Ryan, 1985). Self-determination theory served as the lens for this study. In this phenomenological study, former students' perceptions of the impact of an alternative education program on their lives were explored. How an alternative high school affected disengaged students' autonomy, competence, and relatedness in relation to their education and future was examined.

Researchers have identified the four factors most frequently associated with student disengagement: (1) high absenteeism (10 or more unexcused absences in a six-month period), (2) class/course failure (leading to retention), (3) mandated test failure (leading to retention), and (4) zero tolerance programs (resulting in in-school, out-of-school suspension, and/or placement in disciplinary alternative education programs) (Archambault, Janosz, Fallu, & Pagani, 2009; Bowers, Sprott, & Taff, 2013; Christle, Jolivet, & Nelson, 2005; Darensbourg, Perez, & Blake, 2010; Fine, 1991; Heitzeg, 2009; Henry, Knight, & Thornberry, 2012; Heppen & Therriault, 2008; Legters & Balfanz, 2010; Swanson, 2009).

This chapter is comprised of background literature pertaining to student disengagement, reengagement, and dropout behaviors. Details of the effects of dropping out are outlined, as are disengagement indicators and reengagement interventions.

Motivation and Self-Determination

According to Deci and Ryan (1985), intrinsic motivation occurs when individuals engage in an activity for the sake of the activity itself, for the satisfaction inherent in performing the activity out of interest and enjoyment. Connected to intrinsic motivation is an activity or variety of behaviors that energize an individual; the primary rewards for performing these behaviors are the fulfillment of autonomy, competence, and relatedness needs (Deci & Ryan, 1985). Intrinsic motivation resides in an individual's need for autonomy, competence, and relatedness and is considered the fuel for action to satisfy those innate needs (Hayamizu, 1997). Autonomy is thought to be the foremost human

and psychological need among the three components of intrinsic motivation (Deci & Ryan, 1985).

Deci and Ryan (1985, 2000) suggested that autonomy comes from a sense of wellbeing, perceiving the ability to choose one's course of action, and experiencing oneself as the locus of those actions. Competence is related to a person's sense of accomplishment and a need to feel confident and effective while accomplishing tasks (Deci & Ryan, 1985, 2000). Self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 1985) refers to individuals' perceived competence, which can be different from their actual level of ability. The need for competence translates to a desire to feel confident in one's abilities to complete tasks successfully. Relatedness is defined as the need for "psychological sense of being with others in secure communion or unity" (Ryan & Deci, 1985, p. 7).

Attendance

Attendance is the foundation of learning; if a student does not attend school, he or she cannot learn (Balfanz, Bridgeland, Bruce, & Fox, 2013; Benner & Wang, 2014; Reid, 2012; Sheldon, 2007). In the 2006 study, "The Silent Epidemic: Perspectives of High School Dropouts," Bridgeland, DiIulio Jr., and Morison (2006) noted that common student behaviors such as poor class attendance and course failure often led to students dropping out of school. The students who Bridgeland et al. (2006) interviewed reported missing so much school that they began a cycle of failure. The students would skip school, which would put them behind in their work, which in turn caused them to feel less inclined to attend school.

When extending the conversation to examine the correlation between absenteeism and high school completion, researchers are called to define and use a common set of standards to measure high absenteeism (Gottfried, 2009; Losen, Orfield, & Balfanz, 2006; Rodriguez & Conchas, 2009). However, the various entities that record and house attendance data use different standards of measurements, resulting in differences in minimum attendance expectations (Gottfried, 2010; Landis & Reschly, 2010; Schoeneberger, 2012). Gottfried (2014) found a relationship between where students live and attendance rates. Inner-city school districts with higher crime rates see spikes in absence rates after shootings occur (Gottfried, 2014). Some students who reside in suburban areas where fewer communities have mass-transit may experience higher rates of absenteeism when the family vehicle is in use or needs repair (Gottfried, 2014).

Establishing a specific set of national guidelines to define excused and unexcused absences can help families, communities, and schools better understand the importance of on time, daily attendance (Hartman, Wilkins, Gregory, Gould, & D'Souza, 2011; Klima, Miller, & Nunlist, 2009; Martin & Halperin, 2006; Sheldon, 2007). With a better understanding of how poor attendance contributes to disengagement, schools can improve reengagement strategies developed to increase graduation rates (Balfanz et al., 2013).

U.S. Education

In 2009, Balfanz, Hornig-Fox, Bridgeland, and McNaught submitted *Grad Nation: A Guidebook to Help Communities Tackle the Dropout Crisis*, commissioned by America's Promise Alliance. The researchers reported that from 1983 to 2009, U.S. high

school graduation rates rose to 75%, however, regardless of all the gains in growth, knowledge, and resources in support of education, there was statistically no progress made in increasing the graduation rates (Balfanz et al., 2009).

In the publication *2015 Building a Grad Nation Report: Progress and Challenge in Ending the High School Dropout Epidemic* (Balfanz, Bridgeland, Bruce, & Fox, 2015), the authors reported that the national graduation rate for 2012-13 was 81.4%, with all states except for Idaho reporting. Although the national graduation rate continued to increase, minority students, students coded as economically disadvantaged, and students who received special education services graduated at a lower rate than their peers (Balfanz et al., 2015). Nationally, in 2013, White students graduated at a rate of 86.6%, Hispanic students at 75.2%, Black students at 70.7%, economically disadvantaged students at 73.3%, and students who received special education services at 61.9% (Balfanz et al., 2015). In 2013, the U.S. Department of Education (2015) reported a dropout rate of 6.6% for all students, 4.3% for White students, 7.5% for Black students, and 12.7% for Hispanic students. Balfanz et al. (2015) reported a dropout rate of 11.7% for economically disadvantaged students and 20.0% for students who received special education services. During the 2012-13 school year, 11.8% of all high school students enrolled in either a traditional high school, alternative high school, certificate, or GED program. White students led all student groups enrolling in continuing educational programs (6.3%), followed by Black students at 22%, and Hispanic students at 13.1% (U.S. Department of Education, 2015). In the year 2012-13, the greatest gains in graduation rates came from Hispanic and Black student groups (Balfanz et al., 2015).

Education in Texas

In 2015, the Texas Education Agency reported the following longitudinal graduation data for Texas public school students in the class of 2014: 88.3% of all student groups graduated; Asian students led all graduates at 94.8%, followed by White students at 93%, multiracial students at 91.2%, American Indian students at 87.1%, Pacific Island students at 88.9%, Hispanic students at 85.5%, and Black students at 84.2% (Texas Education Agency [TEA], 2015a). Economically disadvantaged students graduated at 85.2%, special education students at 77.5%, and English language learners at 71.5% (TEA, 2015b).

In the graduating class of 2014, 5.1% of students attended high school for a fifth year or received a General Education Development (GED). Of the group, English language learners led all students at 12.6%, followed by special education students at 11.3%, Hispanic students at 6.4%, Black students at 5.9%, American Indian students at 5.1%, Pacific Island students at 4.2%, multiracial students at 3.9%, White students at 3.4%, Asian students at 2.8%, and economically disadvantaged students at 5.9% (TEA, 2015c).

The Texas Education Agency (2015d) reported that 6.6% of all students in the 2014 cohort dropped out of school. English language learners led all student groups at 15.9%. Special education students followed at 11.2%, Black students at 9.8%, Hispanic students at 8.2%, American Indian students at 7.9%, Pacific Island students at 7%, multiracial students at 4.8%, White students at 3.6% Asian students at 2.4%, and economically disadvantaged students at 9%.

Texas At-risk Indicators

A student in Texas is identified at-risk of dropping out of school if he or she is under the age of 21 and meets any of the following 13 state-defined criteria:

1. is in prekindergarten, kindergarten or grade 1, 2, or 3 and did not perform satisfactorily on a readiness test or assessment instrument administered during the current school year;
2. is in grade 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, or 12 and did not maintain an average equivalent to 70 on a scale of 100 in two or more subjects in the foundation curriculum during a semester in the preceding or current school year or is not maintaining such an average in two or more subjects in the foundation curriculum in the current semester;
3. was not advanced from one grade level to the next for one or more school years;
4. did not perform satisfactorily on an assessment instrument administered to the student under TEC Subchapter B, Chapter 39, and who has not in the previous or current school year subsequently performed on that instrument or another appropriate instrument at a level equal to at least 110 percent of the level of satisfactory performance on that instrument;
5. is pregnant or is a parent;
6. has been placed in an alternative education program in accordance with TEC §37.006 during the preceding or current school year;

7. has been expelled in accordance with TEC §37.007 during the preceding or current school year;
8. is currently on parole, probation, deferred prosecution, or another conditional release;
9. was previously reported through the Public Education Information Management System (PEIMS) to have dropped out of school;
10. is a student of limited English proficiency, as defined by TEC §29.052;
11. is in the custody or care of the Department of Protective and Regulatory Services or has, during the current school year, been referred to the department by a school official, officer of the juvenile court, or law enforcement official;
12. is homeless, as defined No Child Left Behind of 2001 (NCLB), Title X, Part C, Section 725(2), the term “homeless children and youths”, and its subsequent amendments; or
13. resided in the preceding school year or resides in the current school year in a residential placement facility in the district, including a detention facility, substance abuse treatment facility, emergency shelter, psychiatric hospital, halfway house, or foster group home. (TEA, 2014, p. 1)

Texas Education Agency’s Definition of a Dropout

In 2003, the Texas Legislature passed Senate Bill 186, which required school districts to report dropout data and required the Texas Education Agency to compute

dropout and completion rates that were consistent with the U.S. Department of Education's definitions. TEA (2015a) defined a dropout as a student who,

is not enrolled in public school in Grades 7-12, does not return to public school the following fall, is not expelled, and does not graduate, receive a GED certificate, continue school outside the public or private school system, begin college, or die. (p. 18)

The Texas Education Agency (2015a) defined a completer as a student who "did not complete high school in the required four years and returned for a fifth year by enrolling at a public or private high school, or an alternative high school or a certificate program or a GED program" (p. 18).

The Texas Education Agency reported longitudinal graduation, completion, and dropout data for high school cohorts. For the class of 2014, the graduation rate was 88.3%, the completer rate was 5.1%, and the dropout rate was 6.6%. In 2013, the graduation rate was 88%, completer rate 5.4%, and dropout rate 6.6%. The graduation rate was 87.7%, completer rate 6%, and dropout rate 6.3% for the class of 2012. In 2011, the graduation rate was 85.9%, the completer rate was 7.3%, and the dropout rate was 6.8%. For the class of 2010, the graduation rate was 84.3%, completer rate 8.5%, and dropout rate 7.3% (TEA, 2015a). The dropout rate was 7.3% in 2010, 6.8% in 2011, 6.6% in 2012, and 6.6% in 2013. Between 2010 and 2014, the student graduation rate increased 4%, the completer rate increased 3.4%, and the dropout rate decreased 0.7% (TEA, 2015b). The Texas Education Agency and school districts attributed the increases to changes in student engagement processes as well as better reporting of student

movement within the educational system (Creghan & Adair-Creghan, 2015; Duke & Jacobson, 2011; TEA, 2015a).

Texas High School Graduation Requirements

In 1980, the Texas Assessment of Basic Skills (TABS) was enacted as the first of many Texas assessments to link direct basic skills to competency results in mathematics, reading, and writing for students in the third, fifth, and ninth grades to curricula taught statewide (TEA, 2011). Since there was no statewide mandated curriculum, learning objectives were developed and revised by a committee of educators to give districts a set of defined guidelines for student achievement (TEA, 2011). In 1983, a provision was added to the Texas Education Code (TEC) that required ninth grade students who failed to pass the TABS assessment to retake the exam each year until they passed (TEA, 2011). In 1984, an amendment to the language in the TEC changed *basic skills competencies* to *minimum basic skills* (TEA, 2011), which changed the name of the assessment to Texas Educational Assessment of Minimum Skills (TEAMS).

Beginning in 1986, the TEAMS test was used to collect data to determine if the exam measured the alignment of the curriculum being taught and if students were achieving the learning objectives set by the state (TEA, 2011). TEAMS also set a requirement for high school students to pass a statewide assessment in order to be eligible to receive a high school diploma (TEA, 2011). In 1990, TEAMS was revised and became the Texas Assessment of Academic Skills (TAAS), which was developed to measure the accountability of student performance (TEA, 2011). The TAAS test shifted from assessment of minimum skill level to academic skill level, testing students in third, fifth,

seventh, ninth, and eleventh grades as well as a Spanish version for third grade students (TEA, 2011).

In 1993, the TAAS test was revised to assess students in the spring rather than in the fall, and in 2002, passing tenth grade exit-level exams in reading, writing, and mathematics was a requirement for graduation. A biology end-of-course (EOC) exam was administered to students who completed biology (TEA, 2011). Between 1995 and 2002, EOC examinations were offered to students as an option for meeting graduation requirements in biology, English II, and U.S. history (Cruse & Twing, 2000; TEA, 2011; Walsh, Kemmerer, & Maniotis, 2014). In 1999, the Student Success Initiative (SSI) was enacted as a tool for campus administrators to address students who had failed repeatedly the state-mandated test in third, fifth, and eighth grades in reading and mathematics (Cruse & Twing, 2000; TEA, 2011; Walsh et al., 2015).

In 2003, TAAS was revised and became the Texas Assessment Knowledge and Skills (TAKS), implementing detailed curriculum requirements for K-12, focusing on technology, and setting the graduation testing requirement for passing exit level exams in English Language Arts, Mathematics, Science, and Social Studies to graduate from a Texas public school (TEA, 2011; Walsh et al., 2015). With the passage of NCLB in 2004, English language proficiency requirements were added to TAKS for third through twelfth grades (TEA, 2011; Walsh et al., 2015). Between 2004 and 2011, revisions to the TAKS tests were made regarding special education, English language learner, and limited English proficient student requirements (TEA, 2011).

In 2011, field testing began for the State of Texas Assessments of Academic Readiness (STAAR) to replace TAKS in the spring of 2012 (TEA, 2011). STAAR was implemented for students in third, fifth, and eighth grades and assessed English Language Arts, Mathematics, Science, and Social Studies. High school student grade-level assessments were replaced with end-of-course (EOC) assessments in Algebra I, Geometry, Algebra II, Biology, Chemistry, physics, English I, English II, English III, World Geography, World History, and U.S. History (TEA, 2011; Walsh et al., 2015). In 2014, Texas students were required to pass EOC as well as grade-level state examinations in order to be promoted to the next grade level and later graduate (TEA, 2011; Walsh et al., 2015).

Reasons for Dropping Out

Dropping out of school is a process that occurs in stages (Archambault et al., 2009). Researchers have suggested that push-out factors such as high absenteeism, repeated course failure, repeated placement at the disciplinary campus, and retention cause students to drop out (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Deci & Ryan 1985; deCharms, 1968; Harlow, 1958). Researchers have suggested that pull-out factors such as the need to work, becoming a parent, and homelessness cause students to drop out (Boylan & Renzulli, 2014; Bradley & Renzulli, 2011; McNeal, 1997).

School Level Transition

Attendance issues may develop during students' transition from elementary to middle school or from middle school to high school. A middle school student's attendance can either remain at the same rate or even improve when he or she transitions

to a high school if his or her developmental needs are being met (Benner & Wang, 2014; Zvoch, 2006). If the high school is not a good fit developmentally for a middle school student, the student's high school attendance can suffer (Benner & Wang, 2014).

Ninth grade is a critical juncture in American schooling (Bridgeland et al., 2006; Neild, 2009; Stearns & Glennie, 2006). Zvoch (2006) suggested that the added demands of a change of social structure, academic rigor, and credit requirements make the transition to ninth grade difficult for some students. Neild (2009) outlined four reasons why ninth grade is especially challenging for some students; (1) ninth grade overlaps with many physical and emotional life changes; (2) the student is moving into a new environment and breaking ties with friends and teachers at the former school where he or she may have felt safe, comfortable, or, at least, was familiar with his or her surroundings; (3) some students are inadequately prepared for the rigors of high school and fear falling further behind; and (4) the organization of some high schools (for example, class schedules) often are different from what a student was used to in a middle school setting. 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 school (Balfanz et al., 2013; Benner & Wang, 2014; Bridgeland et al., 2006; Hartman et al., 2011; Neild, 2009; Zvoch, 2006).

According to Balfanz and Fox (2015), suspensions in the ninth grade lead to lower attendance rates and course failure in later years for some students who otherwise regularly attended and passed school courses.

Family and Economic Pressures

A student who chooses to stop attending school as a result of pressures to contribute to the family's financial needs is considered to be a student who has been pulled-out of school (Stearns & Glennie 2006). Pull-out factors such as pressures to focus on family responsibilities (for example, caring for siblings and elders) may have a greater influence on female students and students of color (Stearns & Glennie, 2006). According to Taylor, Kochhar, Livingston, Lopez, and Morin (2009), in 2009, the dropout rate of Latino students was 17%, which was almost double the rate for Black students (9%) and nearly three times the rate for White students (6%). Steele (1988) suggested that some students with strong family ties or feelings of obligation to help support their families may have parents who are unable to support their households or care for themselves because of chronic illness. Siblings or grandparents with special needs may demand a student's time and attention. Parents may emphasize the student's family obligations as a way to affirm the student's self-worth and place in the family in the face of a lack of success at school (Steele, 1988).

Parenthood

Becoming a parent during high school is another reason why a student can be pulled-out of school. After becoming a parent, being a student is no longer the dominant role for students; students take on the role of family provider (Jordan, Lara, & McPartland, 1996). However, researchers have shown that more than half of students who become parents later resume their education and enroll in continuing education programs and earn a GED (Entwisle, Alexander, & Olson, 2004). Bjerk (2012) noted that

while high school graduates outperformed their peers who dropped out of school, those students who felt pulled-out of school to work or take care of a family member ultimately reached similar levels of employment in the labor market as their cohort class members who completed high school.

Retention

Retention of a student from third grade forward can increase the student's disengagement (Jimerson, Anderson, & Whipple, 2002). Grade retention is associated with a 4% increase in the probability of dropping out of high school for students retained in the sixth grade and an estimated 7-8% point increase for students retained in the eighth grade (Jacob & Lefgren, 2009). There have been short-term gains produced by test-based retentions policies, however students who are retained become part of the new cohort and many ultimately fall behind once more, only this time with a higher likelihood of dropping out of school altogether (Jacob & Lefgren, 2009). Neild and Balfanz (2006) found that students who dropped out of high school showed multiple risk factors for course failure, failure of mandated tests, high absenteeism, and disciplinary placement. Having multiple course failures can lead to a student being over-aged and under-credited, especially if the student is 17 or 18 years old and in the ninth grade.

Knesting (2008) found that the influence of school factors directly impacted a student's decision to stay in school. For example, the grade stipulations set by a campus principal in an attempt to raise the school's academic standards caused students to be retained in the ninth grade. These grade stipulations required students to earn grades of B or higher in English and mathematics to indicate mastery. Knesting's (2008) five-year

study found that when a grade stipulation was required, there was a correlating decrease in graduation rate.

The process of retention is most prevalent among ethnic minority students and students who are coded as economically disadvantaged and can lead to the unintended consequence of dropping out (Freeman & Simonsen, 2015; Huddleston, 2014).

Marchbanks, Blake, Booth, Carmichael, Seibert, and Fabelo (2015) suggested that there is a correlation between increased rates of retention and students being removed from direct instruction due to exclusionary discipline actions. Some individuals have argued that students cause removals by their disruptive classroom behaviors; others have argued that students who come from lower socioeconomic backgrounds are perceived to be disruptive (Freeman & Simonsen, 2015; Huddleston, 2014; Jacob & Lefgren, 2009).

Christle, Jolivette, and Nelson (2007) discussed early school failure as a starting point that reduces a student's connection to the school, ultimately leading to dropping out. Researchers have posited that although schools cannot change the individual, family, and community components that can place students at-risk for dropping out of school, however schools can be proactive in reducing risk factors by providing a positive and safe learning environment; setting high, yet achievable academic and social expectations; and consistently facilitating academic and social success (Christle et al., 2007).

Student Mobility

Students who change schools are more likely to drop out of school than their peers (Herbers, Reynolds, & Chen, 2013). Gasper, DeLuca, and Estacion (2012) examined the behavioral and educational outcomes of students who changed schools and

found that approximately 30% of high school students attend more than one school during their high school careers. Researchers have found that when students attend more than one high school during their high school careers, they are more likely to drop out of school (Gasper et al., 2012). South, Haynie, and Bose (2007) posited that the characteristics of adolescents' peer networks, in particular, the academic performance within peer networks, are important indicators of the mobility-dropout association.

Relatedness is the need to feel a sense of belonging with others in secure community or unit (Ryan & Deci, 1985). This includes feeling connected with other individuals and with the community. The more individuals feel connected with and related to the community, the more intrinsically motivated they will be. In a school environment, relatedness is formed by interactions between a student and his or her peer group and between a student and teachers and staff. A student is more likely to leave school if these associations do not develop (Deci & Ryan, 1985; South et al., 2007). Fortin, Marcotte, Potvin, Royer, and Joly (2006) found that variables such as gender, age, and grade level may factor into whether or not a highly-mobile student will drop out. According to Benner and Graham (2009), highly-mobile students must navigate and recreate new social and educational climates; students' ability to be successful can be determined by their skill at navigating these systems.

According to Herbers et al. (2013), students who relocate between the fourth and eighth grades are more likely to drop out than their peers. Student mobility does not only affect students; teachers who have invested time and effort in students' lives may feel a sense of loss when students leave school. Interventions can increase the support of both

students and staff, which can help to lessen the negative impact of school mobility (Titus, 2007).

Behavior

Exclusionary discipline techniques such as in-school suspension, out-of-school suspension, and placement in a disciplinary education setting can alienate students from the learning process by directing them away from the classroom and academic attainment and ultimately toward the criminal justice system (Darensbourg et al., 2010). Teske (2011) found that a multi-disciplinary protocol resulted in more effective youth assessments that reduced out-of-school suspensions and increased graduation rates. Teske (2011) suggested that with the onset of zero tolerance policies, schools and school districts began suspending students for up to 10 days for minor infractions such as skipping school, smoking, and fighting, and noted that these policies work under the mindset that removing disruptive students deters others from the same behaviors, but fails to consider the loss of learning for those students who are removed from the learning environment. Researchers have suggested that issues regarding students' disruptive classroom behaviors cannot be addressed within the school alone; the issues must be addressed by collaborations between parents, school faculty, community leaders, and law enforcement personnel (Balfanz et al., 2013; Christle et al., 2005; Darensbourg et al., 2010; Fabelo, Thompson, Plotkin, Carmichael, Marchbanks, & Booth, 2011; Skiba, Reynolds, Graham, Sheras, Conoley, & Garcia-Vazquez, 2006).

Zero tolerance

In the mid-1990s zero tolerance policies became synonymous with discipline in education (Bradley & Renzulli, 2011; Christle et al., 2007; Darensbourg et al., 2010; Greene & Winters, 2006; Heitzeg, 2009; Skiba et al., 2006). The policies began with the war on drugs and then quickly moved to dress code violations, harassment, fighting, hate speech, and ultimately gun-free zones (Bradley & Renzulli, 2011; Christle et al., 2007; Darensbourg et al., 2010; Greene & Winters, 2006; Heitzeg, 2009; Skiba et al., 2006). Skiba et al. (2006) noted, “the intention of zero tolerance policies is to provide a safe and secure learning environment in a fair and consistent manner” (p. 322), however other researchers have suggested that schools are no more safe than prior to the implementation of the zero tolerance policies and that disciplinary policies are not always implemented equitably (Bradley & Renzulli, 2011; Christle et al., 2007; Darensbourg et al., 2010; Greene & Winters, 2006; Heitzeg, 2009; Skiba et al., 2006).

Zero tolerance policies for behaviors such as excessive absences and classroom disruptions have had a significant impact on assigning students to in- and out-of-school suspensions (Bradley & Renzulli, 2011; Christle et al., 2007; Darensbourg et al., 2010; Greene & Winters, 2006; Heitzeg, 2009). The need to work, becoming a parent, homelessness, and zero tolerance policies commonly are called *push-out* factors. Combined with disciplinary alternative education program placements, push-out factors can lead to the loss of classroom instruction and contribute to student disengagement and dropping out of school (Kane, 2006; Slee, 1986; Suh, Suh, & Houston, 2007; Zhang, Willson, Katsiyannis, Barrett, Ju, & Wu, 2010).

Across all student groups, ninth graders and students ages 16 and younger are more likely to leave school due to disciplinary reasons than older male students who tend to leave school for employment (Stearns & Glennie, 2006). Darensbourg et al. (2010) found that when students' unwillingness to comply with school policies and rules combined with predetermined zero tolerance policies that are severe and punitive in nature, some students chose to leave school.

De Witte and Csillag (2014) found a correlation between truancy and leaving school early; their research suggested that more timely personal notifications to parents could improve truancy rates. By reporting and analyzing students' attendance issues at an earlier threshold, stakeholders can intervene, providing students with more time to address the disengagement behavior in a positive, proactive manner (De Witte & Csillag, 2014; Darensbourg et al., 2010; Heitzeg, 2009). Finn and Servoss (2015) suggested that zero-tolerance policies where the student is removed to a disciplinary campus can leave the transgressing student without the opportunity to take responsibility for his or her behavior and leaves him or her less of an active partner in reestablishing his or her place in the classroom when he or she returns.

Brownstein's (2010) research focused on zero tolerance policies aimed at making schools safe. He stressed the importance of mandated, predetermined consequences for rule infractions regardless of the circumstances. Brownstein related the following account:

An eight-year-old girl was suspended from her third-grade class for bringing a pair of cuticle scissors to open the wrapper on her school breakfast. Under the

zero tolerance policy, the teacher believed she had no choice but to report her to the principal. A middle school boy was 13 when the bullying against him started. Under his school's strict discipline rules, all students involved in a fight received the same punishment, regardless of who started it. After several fights that resulted in repeated, multi-day, out-of-school suspensions, fell further and further behind, failed the seventh grade, and became increasingly alienated from his school and he eventually dropped out. These stories are all too typical of what is happening in schools across America. Significant numbers of students are being pushed out of school as a result of "zero tolerance" school discipline policies.

While nobody questions the need to keep our schools safe, teachers, students, and parents are questioning the methods we are using in pursuit of that goal. (p. 23)

School personnel walk a tightrope between keeping students safe and practicing common sense. School shootings can make district and campus administrators leery of students who act out of the ordinary (Heilbrun, Cornell, & Lovegrove, 2015). Other researchers have shown that students lose more instructional time when they are sent to a disciplinary campus (De Witte & Csillag, 2014).

Structural inequities

The dropout rates of Black and Latino students are higher than their White peers (Taylor et al., 2009). De Witte, Cabus, Thyssen, Groot, and van den Brink (2013) noted how structural inequities can cause particular student groups to leave school more often, thereby causing an overrepresentation of the same student groups as dropouts. After zero tolerance policies were instituted in 1995 as a form of disciplinary action for student

behavior, the rate of suspensions increased for all student groups (U.S. Department of Education, 2001). In 2000, Black students represented 17% of the total student population and 34% of all suspended students (U.S. Department of Education, 2001). During the same time frame, Black male students were 2.6 times more likely to be suspended from school than were their White counterparts (Wald & Losen, 2003).

According to Gregory, Cornell, and Fan (2011), higher rates of suspension and expulsion were assigned to Black students who are perceived to be loud, overly aggressive, and unwilling to comply with classroom and campus rules. In 2005, ninth grade led all dropouts by grade level across the country (Balfanz et al., 2015). Researchers have suggested that ninth grade students are the most pushed-out student group for disciplinary reasons (Stearns & Glennie, 2006).

Losen and Skiba (2010) found a 10-point different in suspension rates between gender for Black middle school students and their peers. Skiba, Michael, Nard, and Peterson (2002) detailed a case involving seven Black high school students who were expelled from school for two years for their involvement in a fight at a football game. The researchers recognized the right and responsibility of schools and school boards to preserve the safety of students, staff, and parents on school grounds (Skiba et al., 2002), but noted fairness issues with a two-year suspension for a fistfight that did not involve weapons and that occurred in the same district in which students involved in incidents with weapons received less severe punishments. Skiba et al. (2002) suggested that bias may be inherent in the use of school suspension and expulsion and school personnel who intend to use school suspension and expulsion to enforce school discipline should address

the issue of bias by routinely monitoring and evaluating punishments between all student groups.

Darensbourg et al. (2010) found that after controlling for poverty and related socio-demographic variables, Black students were suspended at a higher rate than White students. Black students were more likely to be suspended for offenses categorized as disruptive and disrespectful and for bothering others. White students were more likely to be suspended for smoking and fighting (Darensbourg et al., 2010; Fabelo et al., 2011; Heilbrun et al., 2015). This raised a concern about schools' use of suspension for discretionary disciplinary actions for lower-level, non-violent offenses (Heilbrun et al., 2015). Researchers have documented factors that systemically have contributed to the overrepresentation of students of color being suspended more often than their peers (Balfanz et al., 2013; Balfanz & Fox, 2015; Boylan & Renzulli, 2014; Bradley & Renzulli, 2011; Brownstein, 2010; Christle et al., 2005; Darensbourg et al., 2010; Fabelo et al., 2011; Heilbrun et al., 2015; Peguero & Bracy, 2015; Skiba et al., 2002).

Effects of Dropping Out

When parents and community members are more involved with students, students take more personal responsibility for their learning (Ziomek-Daigle (2010). When parents and communities are not involved or providing encouragement, high school graduation rates decline (Ziomek-Daigle, 2010). There are many negative repercussions associated with dropping out of high school, including: (1) forgone national income, (2) forgone taxable revenues for support of government services, (3) increased demand for social services, (4) increased crime and antisocial behaviors, (5) reduced political participation

(6) reduced intergenerational mobility, and (7) a poorer level of health (Hayes, Nelson, Tabin, Pearson, & Worthy, 2002; Heckman, Humphries, Veramendi, & Urzua, 2014; Levin & Rouse, 2012; Moretti, 2007; Muenning, 2007; Rouse, 2007; Waldfogel, Garfinkel, & Kelly, 2007).

Employment

Disla (2004) chronicled the earning power of individuals who earned a high school diploma compared to those who did not and found the average annual income of a high school dropout in 2000 was \$12,400, compared to \$21,000 for a high school graduate. Data from the Center for Democratic Policy and the Institute for Educational Leadership indicated that high school dropouts account for 52% of welfare recipients, 82% of the prison population, and 85% of juvenile justice cases (Babcock & Bedard, 2011; Stanard, 2003). Researchers also have found that the decision to drop out of high school leads to other negative impacts including (1) forgone national income, (2) forgone taxable revenues for the support of government services, (3) increased demand for social services, (4) increased crime and antisocial behaviors, (5) reduced political participation, (6) reduced intergenerational mobility, and (7) a poorer level of health (Hayes et al., 2002; Heckman et al., 2014; Levin & Rouse, 2012; Moretti, 2007; Muenning, 2007; Rouse, 2007; Waldfogel et al., 2007).

Income inequality between high school graduates and dropouts has been acknowledged. Since 1990, income gaps created by educational attainment have become economic incentives to graduate from high school (Heckman & LaFontaine, 2010). Wages of skilled workers have increased largely since the early 1970s, compared to the

wages of high school dropouts whose nominal wages have sharply declined during the same time frame (Heckman, Lochner, & Todd, 2006). Although data have indicated that students across the U.S. increasingly have joined the ranks of high school graduates, some researchers have shown that particular student groups are being left behind (Anderson, 2014; Babcock & Bedard, 2011; Balfanz et al., 2015; Boylan & Renzulli, 2014; Clark, Ponjuan, Orrock, Wilson, & Flores, 2013). In contrast, a correlation was found between higher levels of minimum wage earnings and higher dropout rates for Hispanic students across Maryland's counties between 1993-2004, prompting those against raising the minimum wage to argue that doing so encourages young people to leave high school early (Crofton, Anderson, & Rawe, 2009).

In 2014, the United States reported that 77.2 million workers 16 years old and older were being paid at an hourly rate, which equates to 58.7% of all salary age workers (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2015). The federal minimum wage was \$7.25 per hour, however not all of the 58.7% of workers across the U.S. earned the federal minimum wage. Among hourly paid workers age 16 and older, just fewer than 7% of those without a high school diploma earned the federal minimum wage or lower, compared with 4% of employees who had earned a high school diploma earned the federal minimum wage or higher (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2015).

Since World War II, the participation of women in the labor force has greatly expanded (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2014). According to a 2012 labor report on women dropouts aged 16 to 24, women were much less likely to participate in the labor force; 35.5% did so, compared to 68.7% of men (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2014).

As of 2014, women represented 47% of all workers in the labor force. In management, professional, and related occupations, women accounted for 52% of all workers.

Employment rates for women in higher paying management, professional, and related occupations also varied by race. Asian women were employed at these top rate positions at 47%, White women at 43%, Black women at 34%, and Hispanic women at 26%.

Service industry jobs often pay wages that are on the lower end of the pay scale.

Hispanics have the most industry service jobs at 32%, followed by Blacks at 28%, Asians at 22%, and Whites at 20% (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2014).

Researchers have suggested that stakeholders such as government leaders, faith-based leaders, and educators in communities and schools should understand the financial importance of graduating from high school (Babcock & Bedard, 2011; Bjerck, 2012; Carnevale, Smith, & Strohl, 2010; Crofton et al., 2009; Heckman & LaFontaine, 2010; Levin & Rouse, 2012; Princiotta & Reyna, 2009; Rouse, 2007). Forecasters have detailed jobs and their educational requirements through 2018 (Carnevale et al., 2010) and posited that an individual's ability to connect education, training, and careers is key to employability and to attaining and maintaining middle-class status. The ability to match educational alternatives with career options is underdeveloped and, therefore, difficult to project (Carnevale et al., 2010).

Carnevale et al. (2010) indicated that the landscape of postsecondary education requirements is multifaceted; only 35% of postsecondary education is represented by college and university education and training. The majority consists of on-the-job training, formal employer-provided education programs, military training,

apprenticeships, and a variety of other programs (Carnevale et al., 2010). Carnevale et al. (2010) posited that there will be a mismatch between the jobs created in the 2020s and the educational training of the more than 60 million people between the ages of 20 to 45 who seek jobs that require a high school or less level of education, and thus a large majority will be left behind. Unemployed, underemployed individuals likely will be stuck in jobs that do not provide middle-class wages (Carnevale et al., 2010).

Government Assistance

Researchers have chronicled the necessity for government assistance or welfare for high school dropouts. The outlook for women who have dropped out of high school and become welfare recipients has been bleak. High school dropouts who become mothers in adolescence are more likely to become welfare recipients and to obtain their GED than their high school graduate peers (Babcock & Bedard, 2011; Hamil-Luker, 2005; Pavetti & Acs, 2001; Stanard, 2003). Pavetti and Acs stated (2001) that women from minority groups and women with children who do not complete high school have a lower chance of securing satisfactory employment by the age of 27.

According to Pavetti and Acs (2001), “the prospect of the majority of welfare recipients becoming completely self-supporting in a short period of time does not seem promising” (p. 725); earning a GED within four years after dropping out of high school increases the likelihood of permanent exit of mid-adult welfare recipients and is the most effective route off of welfare for young adults (Babcock & Bedard, 2011; Hamil-Luker, 2005; Pavetti & Acs, 2001; Stanard, 2003). Helping adults off of welfare can assist both

individuals and society; helping students to graduate can help to shorten the process (Babcock & Bedard, 2011; Hamil-Luker, 2005; Pavetti & Acs, 2001; Stanard, 2003).

Crime and Incarceration

Hjalmarsson (2008) found that if a student has a history of arrest prior to the age of 16, his or her graduation potential decreases by 27%. Students who drop out are 26% more likely to become inmates than are those who graduate. Sweeten (2006) found that if a student both was arrested and appeared in court during high school, his or her odds of dropping out of high school tripled. Brown (2007) reported that by the age of 30, 52% of Black male dropouts had been incarcerated at least once. Research on adult male prisoners indicated that 68% of inmates are high school dropouts; 35% reported disengagement behaviors such as academic problems as a reason for dropping out of school (U.S. Department of Justice, 2003). Western and Muller (2013) argued that mass incarceration has become part of the social experience of those in poverty in American, thus influencing the collective levels of poverty and its social correlates.

Minimum dropout age requirement laws significantly impact juvenile crime (Anderson, Steinberg, Santos, & Le, 2010). Anderson (2012) suggested that raising the minimum high school dropout age requirements from 16 to 18 could decrease arrest rates by approximately 17%; however, the estimated effects usually are not statistically significant for drug-related arrests. In 2008, the incarceration rate among young, White dropouts was one in eight (Anderson, 2012; Brown, 2007; Heckman et al., 2014; Hjalmarsson, 2008; Leven & Rouse, 2012; Sweeten, 2006; Western & Pettit, 2010). By the mid-2000s, prison time was a common life event for this group. As of the mid-2000s,

more than two-thirds of Black male dropouts were expected to serve time in state or federal prison (Heckman et al., 2014; Leven & Rouse, 2012; Western & Pettit, 2010).

Glaze (2008) found that high rates of parental incarceration likely added to the instability of family life among poor children. Researchers have found that at the time of incarceration, 45% of individuals who were parents were living with their children who were younger than 18 (Western & Pettit, 2010; Wildeman, 2010). In many cases, incarceration has been associated closely with divorce and separation for women, who are left to raise families after their significant others are imprisoned (Comfort, 2007).

Comfort (2007) posited that the effects of penance go beyond the offender. Legally innocent people who are related to an offender are forced to alter their behavior and reorient their life expectations (Western & Pettit, 2010). The family members can suffer changes in their health and experience social and economic repercussions (Western & Pettit, 2010). They potentially can become confined to poverty (Comfort, 2007; Western & Pettit, 2010).

Many economic barriers result in formerly incarcerated parents being less equipped to provide financial stability for their children (Comfort, 2007; Western & Pettit, 2010). Wildeman (2010) found that children of incarcerated parents, particularly boys, are at greater risk of developmental delays and behavioral problems.

Civic Involvement

Political scientists have illustrated how poverty may set in motion political actions that lead to policies that perpetuate poverty (Hayes et al., 2002; Heckman et al., 2014; Levin & Rouse, 2012; Moretti, 2007; Muenning, 2007; Pacheco & Plutzer, 2008; Rouse,

2007; Waldfogel et al., 2007). White youth whose parents attended disadvantaged schools and did not graduate from high school have voter turnout levels of 36% or lower (Pacheco & Plutzer, 2008). However, White youth whose parents attended neutral or low socioeconomic schools and have similar low levels of education have voter turnout levels of 41% and 46% respectively (Pacheco & Plutzer, 2008). For White individuals, becoming a parent in adolescence decreases voter turnout by 6%; dropping out of high school and never returning to school decreases voter turnout by 19%. Being incarcerated decreases voter turnout by 7% (Pacheco & Plutzer, 2008). Black individuals who drop out of high school and never return have voter turnout levels of about 11% lower than their peers who graduated. Black individuals who were incarcerated have voter turnout levels that are 21% lower than their peers who never were incarcerated (Pacheco & Plutzer, 2008). Hispanic youth who dropped out of school and never returned had voter turnout levels that were 10% lower than their peers who graduated.

Within full-time enrollment in a four-year institution, Pacheco and Plutzer (2008) found that the voter turnout for White young adults rose 10%. The Black young adult voter turnout increased 10%, and the Hispanic young adult voter turnout rose 14% (Pacheco & Plutzer, 2008). Within part-time attendance at a two-year institution, White youth voter turnout rose 25% and Black youth voter turnout increased more than 100% (Pacheco & Plutzer, 2008).

Health

Poor levels of health are associated with a higher rate of dropping out of high school. Eaton, Brener, and Kann (2008) found an association between health risk

behaviors of high school students (for example, accidental injuries, violence, tobacco use, alcohol use, drug use, and risky sexual behaviors) and being absent from school with or without permission. The researchers found that students who had permission to be absent from school were just as likely to participate in unhealthy risk behaviors that resulted in accidental injuries, violence, tobacco use, alcohol use, drug use, and risky sexual behaviors as were students who were absent from school without permission (Eaton et al., 2008). Additionally, students who were chronically absent from school without permission were approximately twice as likely to participate in these same types of health risk behaviors as were students who were absent with permission (Eaton et al., 2008).

Researchers have suggested that education exerts the strongest positive influence on health, yet education is correlated more often with income than with increased health benefits (Freudenberg & Ruglis, 2007). The higher the level of education an individual has, the more the individual often earns, therefore enabling him or her to afford better housing, healthier food, and better health care (Freudenberg & Ruglis, 2007). Woolf, Johnson, Phillips, and Philipsen (2005) suggested that helping to remedy conditions that cause the poor to die in higher disproportional numbers may save more lives than making incremental improvements in the technology of medical care. Healthier eating habits and exercise contribute to decreases in cardiovascular disease, cancer, alcohol-related diseases, and suicide (Crum, Ensminger, Ro, & McCord, 1998). Remedies include modifying aspects of school and family involvement to increase intended levels of education, lifestyle, and environment (Crum et al., 1998).

Early Warning Systems

Researchers have informed the PK-12 system of the importance of early identification of student disengagement (Henry et al., 2012; Heppen & Therriault, 2008; Legters & Balfanz, 2010; Neild, Balfanz, & Herzog, 2007; Therriault, Heppen, O’Cummings, Fryer, & Johnson, 2010). In 2011, Sparks posited that the U.S. was in the midst of an upsurge in the creation and use of longitudinal data systems to identify at-risk and dropout behaviors as early as first grade. Sparks (2013) reported that Montgomery County Public Schools were discussing the addition of three *red flag* markers to their at-risk indicators: (1) chronic absenteeism, which increases disengagement risks by 91%; (2) severe disciplinary infractions, which increase disengagement risks by 101%; and (3) and reading or mathematics failures, which increase disengagement risks by 134%. Balfanz, Bruce, and Fox (2013) suggested that the utilization of student data can serve as a catalyst for systemic change if student data are used as tools to improve instruction and increase the level of learning for students, rather than solely to evaluate teachers.

An important element in the development of an early warning system (EWS) for student identification is the use of indicators based on readily accessible data which can be used by campus staff to make real-time predictors of student disengagement (Heppen & Therriault, 2008). An early warning system should measure both student absence numbers and the number of student course failures. As the number of absences and course failures increase, so does the possibility of student disengagement (Kennelly & Monrad, 2007). EWS systems need to be cumulative; data should be updated weekly and analyzed for immediate campus use, then added to a student’s portfolio that moves with

the student from grade level to grade level within the school system (Heppen & Therriault, 2008; Kennelly & Monrad, 2007). Implementing an early warning system helps teachers address student disengagement behaviors proactively (Henry et al., 2012; Heppen & Therriault, 2008; Legters & Balfanz, 2010; Neild et al., 2007; Therriault et al., 2010). Claudet (2015) suggested using EWSs as tools to design anticipatory and actionable school improvement plans, layering intervention programs with multiple teaching and learning improvement strategies to assist educators in implementing problem-based data analysis and intervention systems to support student growth. EWSs have been designed to isolate multiple risk factors of disengagement.

Reengagement Interventions

The No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act of 2001 led to the identification of specific areas in which public education was in need of reform (U.S. Department of Education, 2001). In response to NCLB, schools and school districts have worked to reengage students at all grade levels (Barrington & Hendricks, 1989; Disla, 2003; Fine, 1991; Hayes et al., 2002; Slee, 1986; South et al., 2007; Stanard, 2003; Stearns & Glennie, 2006; Suh et al., 2007; Valencia & Johnson, 2006; Zvoch, 2006). Researchers have identified behaviors such as chronic absenteeism (ten or more absences), zero tolerance policies, class/course failures, and mandated test failures that can serve as early indicators of student disengagement (Archambault et al., 2009; Balfanz et al., 2013; Barry & Reschly, 2012; Bowers & Sprott, 2012a; Boylan & Renzulli, 2014; Doll, Eslami, & Walters, 2013).

Tier-leveled Engagement Interventions

Tier-leveled interventions are student-centered strategic changes developed to address specific student needs such as attendance processes, grading cycles, transition processes, and de-escalation strategies (Balfanz et al., 2013; Christle et al., 2007; Cooper, 2013; Fries, Carney, Blackman-Urtega, & Savas, 2012; Pharris-Ciurej, Hirschman, & Willhoft, 2012). Educators need to be equipped with interventions to meet student needs at each grade level (Balfanz et al., 2007; Duffy, 2007; Neild, 2009). High school teachers and staff are responsible for teaching students as well as assisting them in their efforts to pass federal and state testing, monitoring credits and course completions so that students can stay on track to graduate, and monitoring attendance to remain within state truancy and attendance for credit requirements (Duffy, 2007; Neild, 2009).

High school students are assessed on their mastery of grade-level content, therefore instruction should address grade-level content and balance flexibility of assessments with consistency while considering and incorporating culturally responsiveness for students from diverse backgrounds (Countinho & Oswald, 2004; Duffy, 2007; Neild, 2009). According to Countinho and Oswald (2004), universal, high-quality instruction across all content areas must be agreed to and pursued to support the growth of diverse student population groups. Keys to establishing a foundation for higher-level student success include continual professional development and sustained parental collaboration with effective communication among all constituents (Countinho & Oswald, 2004; Duffy, 2007; Neild, 2009). The purpose of high-quality instruction is to

blend academic and positive behavioral support and develop tertiary levels of support for high school student success (Duffy, 2007).

District truancy prevention measures are proactive attendance interventions designed to create positive student engagement (Balfanz et al. 2013; Bradley & Renzulli, 2011). School employees communicate with students and parents via phone calls, emails, and letters about the importance of on-time, daily attendance (De Witte et al., 2014; Henry & Thornberry, 2010; Klima et al., 2009; Maynard, McCrea, Pigott, & Kelly, 2013; Reid, 2012). There are two parts to Texas compulsory attendance laws. Failure to attend (truancy) is when a student is out of school with an unexcused absence. Attendance for credit (the 90% rule) is when a student is absent from school with or without an excuse. The 90% rule states that a student must be in attendance for 90% of the time a class is offered and that if attendance dips below 90%, the student must serve seat-time to substitute for the time lost (TEA, 2015e).

Under the *failure to attend* law, the first notification families receive is when a student has unexcused absences for three days or parts of days. The second notification families receive is when a student has unexcused absences for 10 days or parts of days (TEA, 2015e). Under the attendance for credit law, families are notified if and when a student has missed five days within a semester, indicating that he or she has reached a critical amount of absences (TEA, 2015e). If the student reaches 18 days in a school year, a second letter is sent to indicate that the student has reached the maximum number of days allowed and that seat-time make-up is required (TEA, 2015e). If a student is not in school for at least 75% of the time a class is offered, he or she may not receive credit for

the class unless he or she has completed make-up seat-time (TEA, 2015e). School employees inform staff, parents, and students of district attendance expectations and inform stakeholders when students are within a two-week mark of missing too much school (Gottfried, 2009; Jerald, 2006).

Implementation of attendance processes can help to foster students' positive outlook toward school and boost the school climate (Christle et al., 2007; Hartman et al., 2011; Heppen & Therriault, 2008; Klima et al., 2009; Reid, 2012; Schoeneberger, 2012). The length of a grading period can contribute to student success if teachers are encouraged to reteach and extend lessons (Cooper, 2013; Iachini, Buettner, Anderson-Butcher, & Reno, 2013). A student is considered over-aged and under-credited if he or she repeatedly fails courses, resulting in disengagement (Knesting, 2008). Establishing shorter grading periods can provide students with more frequent information about their grades and help encourage student success (Cooper, 2013; Iachini et al., 2013).

Transition Processes

When transition processes are in place, middle and high school staff members are able to institute support processes for the students who are transitioning to their campuses (Benner & Graham, 2009; Valencia & Johnson, 2006). The goal is to have support processes in place so that students experience a more seamless transition (Ream & Rumberger, 2008).

Implementing educational transition programs for incoming and potentially struggling elementary students transitioning into middle school and incoming and potentially struggling middle school students transitioning into high school can help to

develop a school climate of success (Benner & Graham, 2009; Pharris-Ciurej et al., 2012; Ream & Rumberger, 2008; Valencia & Johnson, 2006). Additional processes can assist students in preparing for exit and end-of-course exams by alleviating stresses caused by change and failure (Babcock & Bedard, 2011; Dryden, 2010; McNeil, Lloyd, Kane, Riddell, Stead, & Weedon, 2008).

Findings from studies such as those conducted by Stearns and Glennie (2006) and Samel, Sondergeld, Fischer, and Patterson (2011) have informed practice by providing more information about which student groups may drop out more often than others. The research has encouraged the creation and implementation of targeted interventions at both middle and high school levels as well as transition programs from middle to high school (Balfanz et al., 2007; Benner & Graham, 2009; Samel et al., 2011; Stearns & Glennie, 2006). Ninth graders lead all grade levels in dropping out of high school. The majority of the 20% of students who drop out are male students of color, students who received special educational services, and students who are coded as economically disadvantaged (Balfanz et al., 2013; Reid, 2012; Samel et al., 2011; Stearns & Glennie, 2006).

Behavioral Interventions

The development of de-escalating processes such as restorative practices allows students to learn empathy and teachers to understand student behaviors better (McCluskey, Lloyd, Kane, Riddell, Stead, & Weedon, 2008; Mendez, Knoff, & Ferron, 2002; Mirsky, 2007; Skiba et al., 2002). In the early 2000s, research on zero tolerance policies revealed that the removal of students from classroom instruction had a detrimental effect on student outcomes (Mendez et al., 2002; Skiba et al., 2002; Vavrus &

Cole, 2002). Skiba et al. (2002) found that race and gender play a disproportionate role in school punishment (Fenning & Rose, 2007; Hirschfield, 2008; Mendez et al., 2002; Skiba et al., 2002; Vavrus & Cole, 2002). In 2005, states across the U.S. began reexamining zero tolerance policies (Christle et al., 2005; Darensbourg et al., 2010). In order to keep students in the classroom, school districts began to increase the number of staff development opportunities for educators that centered on cultural differences, racial diversity, and economic differences (Fries et al., 2012; Golann, 2015; Greene & Winters, 2006).

Alternative Schools

Alternative high schools have served public high school students since 1975 (Kellmayer, 1995; Lange & Sletten, 2002). Since the passage of NCLB in 2001, the U.S. Department of Education has defined alternative education schools to include public elementary and secondary schools that address the needs of students whose needs typically have not been met in a traditional school. Alternative education includes all educational activities that fall outside of the traditional K-12 school system, including home schooling, GED preparation, special programs for gifted children, and charter schools (Aron, 2006; Sable & Hoffman, 2002).

Alternative public schools were created initially as an option for fair and equitable education for students who did not fit well within a traditional school setting (Aron, 2006; Lange & Sletten, 2002). Aron (2006) suggested that alternative schools serve students who (1) have fallen *off track*, (2) have gotten into trouble and need short-term recovery to return back to traditional high school, (3) are about to become parents, (4)

have home situations that pull them out of school, (5) are over-aged and under-credited, but are returning to obtain the credits they need to transition into community colleges or other programs, and (6) have been retained repeatedly and are receiving special education services.

Dupper (2008) suggested that there are two opposing models of alternative schools, campuses which disruptive, dysfunctional students are encouraged to attend in an attempt to protect and benefit students who remain at the traditional schools, and campuses created to fix the educational environment, such as credit recovery programs that are designed for over-aged and under-credited students and staffed with teachers who choose to work with at-risk youth and offer individualized instruction with clear program goals. Researchers have suggested that leaders and teachers in traditional school settings often shun the best practices of alternative schools such as flexible school hours, flexible rules and consequences, strong home-school connections, and a focus on relationships and school climate (Slaten, Irby, Tate, & Rivera, 2015). Hurst (1994) posited that most neighborhood schools are designed to operate in a one-size fits all model and that some students do not benefit from this design.

In 2015, alternative schools commonly were defined by their mission to educate students most at-risk for failure in traditional public high schools (Aron, 2006; Kellmayer, 1995; Lange & Sletten 2002; Sable & Hoffman 2002). Many of these schools focused on students who were over-aged and under-credited and served as an intervention for students at-risk for dropping out and as a second-chance program so that students who had dropped out could return to school to earn a diploma or GED (Franklin, Streeter,

Kim, & Tripodi, 2007; Hemmer, Madsen, & Torres, 2013; Kim, 2013; Lagana-Riordan, Aguilar, Franklin, Streeter, Kim, Tripodi, & Hopson, 2011; Lehr, Tan, & Ysseldyke, 2009; Streeter, Franklin, Kim, & Tripodi, 2010; Tyler & Lofstrom, 2009). At the national level, data on alternative schools and behavior campuses sometimes are combined in the same category; therefore, it can be difficult to determine which students have been assigned to a behavior campus and which students apply to attend an alternative high school.

Summary

This chapter included an evaluation of the current literature pertaining to the effects of dropping out of high school. Chapter 3 includes the method for the study. The study's findings are included in Chapter 4. In Chapter 5 are the summary of the study; implications for research, practice, and theory; and recommendations for further research.

Chapter 3

Research Methodology

Although the national high school dropout rate has increased, the gap between student groups has widened (Balfanz, Bridgeland, Bruce, & Fox, 2015; Bowers, Sprott, & Taff, 2013; Boylan & Renzulli, 2014). Schools and school districts are increasing interventions that foster student engagement (Archambault, Janosz, Fallu, & Pagani, 2009; Balfanz, Herzog, & MacIver, 2007; Creghan & Adair-Creghan, 2015; Gonzales, Wong, Toomey, Millsap, Dumka, & Mauricio, 2014). Washington, Hughes, and Cosgriff (2012) found that high-poverty youth who are involved in their educational planning have a higher rate of engagement. However, students of color and students who receive special education services lag behind their peers in graduating from high school within four years (Anderson, 2014; Balfanz & Fox, 2015; Davila & de Bradley, 2010).

According to self-determination theory, human beings have an inherent predisposition to be curious of their surrounding and are interested in learning and developing their knowledge (Deci & Ryan, 1985; Deci & Ryan, 2003; Niemiec & Ryan, 2009; Ryan & Deci, 2000; Washington et al., 2012). Niemiec and Ryan found that educators introduce external controls into learning environments, which can destabilize the sense of relatedness between teachers and students. Self-determination theory includes the premise that both intrinsic motivation and autonomous types of extrinsic motivation are conducive to individual engagement and optimal learning in an educational setting (Niemiec & Ryan, 2009).

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to explore the deciding factors for school disengagement and reengagement and examine students' perceptions of the effects of an alternative high school on their autonomy, competence, and relatedness via the lens of self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 1985; Deci & Ryan, 2000; Niemiec & Ryan, 2009; Ryan & Deci, 2000). Face-to-face interviews were conducted with former students, teachers, and administrators from an alternative high school in the southwestern U.S.

Design of the Study

In qualitative research, the researcher serves as the key instruments in data collection (Creswell, 2007). The researcher seeks to gain insight by studying people in their natural surroundings (Creswell, 2007). A qualitative methodology was chosen for this study to explore individuals' experiences with school disengagement and reengagement and examine how the individuals perceived that an alternative high school affected their autonomy, competence, and relatedness (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Deci & Ryan 1985; deCharms, 1968; Harlow, 1958).

This study utilized the qualitative approach of phenomenology (Creswell, 2007). In phenomenological research, the focus is on a person's perception of the meaning of an event and how he or she interprets those experiences (van Manen, 1990). 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 the individuals' experiences (Moustakas, 1994).

The former students in this study had become disengaged from the traditional high school. The students had a shared experience of disengagement. Phenomenology was used to allow the individuals' voices to be heard. The transcripts were read and reread; like significant statements were coded to allow themes to develop and the essence to emerge (Moustakas, 1994). Transcripts of the interviews were indexed with broad analytic codes. As patterns developed, themes emerged that exemplified the experiences of the participants.

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 did the teachers and administrators perceive that the alternative high school students' experiences affected their autonomy, competence, and relatedness?

Instrument

Interview questions for former students, teachers, and administrators were aligned with self-determination theory's framework of autonomy, competence, and relatedness. Autonomy concerns experiencing choice and feeling like the initiator of one's own actions (deCharms, 1968; Deci, 1975). Competence is related to succeeding at optimally challenging tasks and being able to attain outcomes (Skinner, 1995; White, 1959). Relatedness concerns the individuals' ability to establish a sense of mutual respect, and reliance with others (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Harlow, 1958). A review of the literature of disengagement and reengagement student behaviors indicated that particular student groups are more at-risk than others, thus it was important to capture demographic data for the former student participants (See Appendix A).

The interview questions were designed in a series of stages. The literature was reviewed on the topics of student dropout behaviors, student disengagement and reengagement behaviors, and dropout prevention strategies. The literature was used to guide the development of the open-ended interview questions (Creswell, 2007). The researcher encouraged participants to expand on responses by using phrases such as *can you tell me more about*, and *please tell me why you think that happened* (Creswell, 2007). Peer experts within the field of dropout prevention reviewed proposed interview questions and provided feedback. Questions that the expert group members believed were redundant or overstated were removed. Questions that were understated were redefined. This process was repeated throughout the development of the interview protocol (See Appendices B and C).

Participant Selection

A purposeful sampling method was used to recruit participants for this study (Creswell, 2013; Welman & Kruger, 1999). Purposeful sampling is used commonly in qualitative research for the identification and assembly of information-rich cases related to the phenomenon of interest (Krueger, 1988; Palinkas, Horwitz, Green, Wisdom, Duan, & Hoagwood, 2013). The school district of the alternative high school campus from which the participants came did not have a large number of students enrolled in the alternative high school; therefore students from 1998 to 2014 were identified as possible participants. School district staff members provided the names and contact information for prospective participants who were enrolled in the alternative high school from 1998-2014, covering a span of 15 years. All students identified had been enrolled at a traditional high school in the school district and then applied to and attended the alternative high school. Ten former students participated (see Table 1).

Table 2-1

Student Participant Data

<u>Pseudonym</u>	<u>Age</u>	<u>Gender</u>	<u>Ethnicity</u>	<u>Status</u>
Albert	23	Male	Hispanic	Dropout
Brandon	20	Male	White	Dropout
Cynthia	22	Female	Hispanic	Graduate
Jim	19	Male	White	Graduate
Khalid	19	Male	Asian	Graduate
Nina	19	Female	Hispanic	Dropout
Rick	21	Male	White	Graduate
Suzanne	23	Female	Hispanic	Dropout
Tara	19	Female	White	Graduate
Trey	21	Male	White	Dropout

The three teachers selected to participate had been teaching for 10 or more years at the high school level; each had earned an advanced educational degree. The two alternative campus administrators were the campus director and the campus counselor; each held an advanced educational degree (see Table 2). All campus staff members had participated in professional development related to teacher-student relationship building.

After obtaining both school district and Institutional Review Board approval, prospective former student participants were contacted by phone. Prospective teacher and administrator participants were recruited by email. During the initial contact, the researcher and prospective participants agreed upon dates and times for face-to-face interviews. Locating graduates who wanted to participate was not difficult; there was an abundance of prospective participants. It was more difficult to locate students who had dropped out because there were fewer dropouts overall and some of the individuals no longer lived in the area. Two sets of siblings agreed to participate in the study. One set of siblings was comprised of two graduates and the other set of siblings was comprised of a graduate and a dropout.

Table 2-2

Teacher and Administrator Data

<u>Pseudonym</u>	<u>Gender</u>	<u>Ethnicity</u>	<u>Experience</u>	<u>Degree</u>
Amanda	Female	White	10+	M.Ed.
Donna	Female	White	10	M.Ed.
Judy	Female	White	10+	M.Ed.
Patti	Female	White	20+	Ph.D.
Steve	Male	White	15+	M.Ed.

Study Site

This study was conducted with students who had graduated from or who dropped out of an alternative high school. The pseudonym *Passages* was chosen for the alternative high school to help ensure confidentiality for the former students and staff who participated in the study (Orb, Eisenhauer, & Wynaden, 2001). *Passages* was established in 1994 with a mission to support students who were labeled at-risk for dropping out of traditional high schools within the school district. *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. The eligibility criteria for *Passages* included but were not limited to a year or more deficiency in credits, pregnant or parenting, being coded at-risk, and/or socioeconomic factors such as the need to work more than 15 hours a week, receiving free or reduced lunch, or being homeless. Students could obtain an application for *Passages* from their traditional high school's counseling office. After the student and parent completed their portion of the application, the application was returned to the traditional high school's counseling office for teacher recommendations then submitted to *Passages*. Students could not apply to *Passages* directly.

The alternative high school had a staff of twelve: eight content instructional teachers, a data secretary, an office secretary, a counselor, and a campus director. Student enrollment at *Passages* varied throughout the school year and from year to year. The average enrollment was 50 students. Students graduated from *Passages* after they

complete all required curriculum and mandatory testing. Graduation ceremonies were held every Friday as needed. District administrators and teachers who supported students often attend graduation. Passages also held an end-of-year graduation ceremony. All of the graduates from the past school year are invited to return to Passages to walk across the stage. Each year, most of the graduates returned to participate in the end-of-year ceremony.

Although Passages served at-risk students, the campus did not have a working cafeteria. Students who received free breakfast and lunch sat in the hallway and outside of the office area to eat their meals. On fair weather days, students sat outside to eat. Many walked to nearby fast food restaurants to purchase their lunch. Staff and students had a common lunch hour; however teachers did not interact with students during lunch. Transportation was provided to students who were in need, however, the students had to go to their respective traditional high school to catch the bus to the alternative high school. Since the alternative high school functioned as a credit recovery program, the student body primarily was made up of 17-year-old and older students. The school district's student population was 86% White and the majority of students who attended the alternative high school were White.

Students who attended the alternative high school were required to complete the same number of course credits as their peers at the traditional high school unless they decided to graduate on the minimum plan. The alternative high school did not offer foreign language courses, so students had to take an alternative elective or graduate on the state minimum plan that required no foreign language courses. Students who

graduated on the minimum plan were required by the state to attend a community college before entering a four-year institution (TEA, 2015d).

Data Gathering

Data were collected via face-to-face audio-recorded interviews with study participants (Creswell (2007). Participants were interviewed by the researcher at predetermined sites. Each interview lasted between 45 minutes and two hours.

Data were collected from 10 former students (five graduates and five dropouts), three teachers, and two campus administrators. All of the participants were from one alternative campus. 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 locations included offices, an automobile repair shop, apartments, and coffee shops. After the confidentiality statement was read and signed, the participant and researcher took a few minutes to become acquainted. All but one of the former student interviews went as planned. One former student brought her two-year-old son to the interview, so the time it took to respond to the questions was extended.

The scheduling of the teacher and administrator interviews went well. An email was sent to the prospective teacher and administrator participants to invite them to join the study. Of the teacher participants, the special education teacher had taught at the alternative school the least number of years (three years). The mathematics teachers had taught at the school since it opened. The history teacher had come to the campus from a traditional high school 11 years before the time of the interview. The counselor had been at the campus for five years. The campus director had served in her leadership role for 17

years. The interviews with the staff members were conducted in early fall, when new students were arriving and the campus and new student orientation processes appeared to be fresh on the staff members' minds.

Treatment of Data

Upon completion of the face-to-face interviews, the data were transcribed by the researcher and returned to each respective participant for clarification. The written transcripts were read multiple times in order to acquire an understanding of what was being shared (Colaizzi, 1978). After multiple readings of the transcripts, similar significant phrases and sentences from each transcript were color-coded. The researcher formulated meanings from the significant phrases and statements, clustered them, and examined the data for themes common to the participants' experiences (Creswell, 2007; Moustakas, 1994). The interviews of the teachers and administrators were used to triangulate the data from the former students (Creswell, 2007; Moustakas, 1994).

Throughout the interview and coding processes, 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). Interview questions one through eight of the former student interview protocol were aligned with autonomy, which concerns experiencing choice and feeling like the initiator of one's own actions (deCharms, 1968; Deci, 1975). Questions nine through 14 were aligned with competence, which concerns succeeding at optimally challenging tasks and being able to attain desired outcomes (Skinner, 1995; White, 1959); questions 15 through 18 were aligned with relatedness, which concerns establishing a sense of mutual respect and reliance with others

(Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Harlow, 1958). The teacher and administrator protocol was designed to help triangulate the responses of the former students. For the teacher and administrator interview protocol, questions were developed to address how the teachers and administrators build relationships, fostered responsibility for decision making, and offered support to the students at the alternative high school. Interview questions one through three of the teacher and administrator interview protocol were aligned with autonomy, four and five were aligned with competence, and six was aligned with relatedness.

Peer experts reviewed the data throughout the process to help ensure clarity and eliminate bias (Creswell, 2007; Moustakas, 1994). The peer experts worked within the field of student engagement. Each was provided with copies of the interview transcripts to review. The copies did not include identifiable information.

Trustworthiness

The purpose of phenomenological research is to explore the shared experiences of the participants of a phenomenon (Creswell, 2007; Moustakas, 1994). It was assumed that the participants provided truthful responses. Triangulation is the process of verifying information from different individuals (Creswell, 2007). Triangulation was employed as a mechanism to assist with trustworthiness (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Data were collected from two different groups of students (graduates and dropouts) and from teachers and administrators (Creswell, 2007; Moustakas, 1994). The interviews with the teachers and administrators were conducted to attest to the accuracy of the alternative

campus application process, characteristics of the instructional setting, and impact of goal setting and advisor mentoring on student success.

Summary

This chapter included details of the methodology employed. Included in the discussion were the design of the study, instrumentation, selection of participants, and description of the study site. Study findings are included in Chapter 4, including details of the educational experiences encountered by the former students and themes and subthemes that emerged from the data. Chapter 5 includes the summary of the study; implications for research, practice, and theory; and recommendations for further research.

Chapter 4

Data Analysis

National high school graduation rates are rising, yet students continue to drop out of school (Balfanz, Bridgeland, Bruce, & Fox, 2015; Bowers, Sprott, & Taff, 2013; Boylan & Renzulli, 2014). High absenteeism can indicate that students are becoming disengaged, which can lead to dropping out of high school (Balfanz, Bridgeland, Bruce, & Fox, 2013; Benner & Wang, 2014; Gottfried, 2009; Losen, Orfield, & Balfanz, 2006; Reid, 2012; Sheldon, 2007). Alternative high schools have become a tool within school districts to help support at-risk student graduation, yet students continue to drop out (Aron, 2006; Dupper, 2008; Kellmayer, 1995; Lange & Sletten 2002; Sable & Hoffman 2002). There is an abundance of research on student behaviors exploring the processes of student disengagement (Benner & Graham, 2009; Bowers et al., 2013; Lessard, Butler-Kisber, Fortin, Marcotte, Potvin, & Royer, 2008), however there is a lack of understanding of why students become disengaged in the first place. This study was conducted to provide insight on 10 traditional high school students who became disengaged from school and to examine their perceptions of the effect the alternative high school had on their decision to either graduate or dropout.

In this phenomenological study, deciding factors for school disengagement and reengagement were explored, via self-determination theory, by examining the voices of students who either graduated or dropped out of an alternative high school (Deci & Ryan, 1985; Deci & Ryan, 2000; Niemiec & Ryan, 2009; Ryan & Deci, 2000). Students' perceptions were examined of how the alternative high school affected their autonomy, competence, and relatedness pertaining to their education and future (Deci & Ryan, 1985;

Deci & Ryan, 2000; Niemiec & Ryan, 2009; Ryan & Deci, 2000). In this chapter, the participants' demographics and backgrounds are described. Details of the experiences students encountered throughout the participants' educational careers are shared and the themes and subthemes that emerged from the data are discussed. The findings will be discussed by research question and by theme.

Participants

Face-to-face interviews were conducted with 10 former students (five graduates and five dropouts), three teachers, and two school administrators from the same alternative high school. All student participants had become disengaged at their traditional high school, then applied to and attended the district alternative high school. The student participants ranged in ages from 19 to 23. Six were male and four were female; five were White, one was Asian, and four were Hispanic. All three teachers were White females and all had earned advanced degrees. Both of the administrators were White; the counselor was male and the director was female. The director had earned a Ph.D. in Educational Leadership and the counselor had earned a Master of Education in School Counseling. In order to help to maintain confidentiality, the participants were asked to choose a pseudonym from a list provided by the researcher.

Khalid

Khalid was a 19-year-old, Asian male who graduated from an alternative high school. He entered traditional high school at 14; he attended traditional high school for two years and an alternative high school for two years. Khalid shared that he did not receive special education services, however he was coded Limited English Proficient

(LEP). Khalid passed state and end-of-course exams and never was retained. He was suspended at least five times from the traditional high school and had attendance issues while in high school.

Khalid and his family moved to Texas from Morocco before the start of his freshman year of high school. At the time of the interview, his father was traveling back and forth between Morocco and the U.S. for work. Khalid's mother did not speak English. Khalid had two older siblings who did not reside in the household, but who contributed financially to the family. Khalid described not feeling welcomed at his first high school; during his junior year he requested and received a transfer to another traditional high school in the district.

Upon enrollment at the second traditional high school, Khalid described being relegated to lessons in the library rather than regularly scheduled classes. Khalid explained that he did not know at the time how his schedule should have been built; however, he experienced success with the individualized instruction. He began skipping school during his senior year in order to work and moved to the alternative high school to support his work schedule. Khalid was currently attending a community college and had plans to attend a four-year university to study engineering.

Rick

Rick was a 21-year-old, White male who graduated from an alternative high school. He entered traditional high school at the age of 14. Rick attended traditional high school for four years and an alternative high school for one year. Rick did not receive special education or LEP services. He passed state and end-of-course examinations but

was retained. Rick was suspended at least six times during his four years at the traditional high school and only had attendance issues while attending the traditional high school.

Rick started school in the district when he was in the fifth grade. He had an older sister who graduated from the traditional high school and a younger brother who attended and graduated from the same alternative high school as he did. When Rick was in elementary school, his father began drinking heavily, which took a toll on the family. During his junior year of high school, Rick began skipping school. Rick shared that he also encouraged his younger brother to skip school. Rick was encouraged by a school district administrator to apply to the alternative high school. He attended and graduated from the alternative high school as a fifth-year senior, therefore he was counted by the district as a completer. Rick earned a certificate in automotive repair and at the time of the interview was employed.

Jim

Jim was a 20-year-old, White male who graduated from an alternative high school. He entered traditional high school at the age of 15 and attended traditional high school for three years and an alternative high school for one year. Jim did not receive special education or LEP services. He passed state and end-of-course examinations and was not retained. Jim was suspended between eight to 10 times during his three years at the traditional high school and had attendance issues in high school. Rick and Jim are siblings.

Jim entered school in the district when he was in the fourth grade. He had an older sister who graduated from the traditional high school and an older brother who attended

and graduated from the alternative high school. When Jim was in elementary school, his father began drinking heavily. Jim began skipping school his sophomore year with his older brother. He was taken to truancy court where he was ordered back to school. Jim was encouraged by a district administrator to apply to the alternative high school. At the time of the interview, Jim had completed two years of post-secondary schooling and had a job.

Tara

Tara was a 19-year-old White female who graduated from an alternative high school. She entered traditional high school at the age of 14. Tara attended traditional high school for two years and alternative high school for one and a half years. She did not receive special education or LEP services. Tara passed state and end-of-course examinations. She was not retained or suspended at any time, but had attendance issues at the traditional high school.

Tara began school in the district when she entered kindergarten. She came from a single parent household and had a younger brother. When Tara was in high school, her family became homeless moved in with her mother's friend. When Tara presented the change of address to the office staff at her traditional high school, she was directed to the other traditional high school because of zoning. She began skipping school due to homeless issues, so rather than file truancy a district administrator suggested that she apply to the alternative high school. At the time of the interview Tara was studying social work at four-year college.

Cynthia

Cynthia was a 22-year-old Hispanic female who graduated from an alternative high school. She entered traditional high school at the age of 15 and attended traditional high school for one year and an alternative high school for two years. Cynthia did not receive served special education or LEP services. Cynthia passed state testing but was not sure about her end-of-course examination results. She was not retained or suspended and had attendance issues in high school.

Cynthia and her family moved to Texas from California when she was in middle school. Her father had owned a business in California and the family was well off financially until the business had to close unexpectedly. The family moved to a new state and lived in an apartment. Cynthia's parents and older siblings were undocumented, which added a layer of difficulty for the father to obtain employment upon the family's arrival in Texas. Cynthia's father became addicted to drugs, which caused more strain on the family.

Cynthia described feeling pressured to help support her family financially. Cynthia wanted her mom to be able to stay at home to take care of her younger sister and not worry about deportation, so Cynthia began working 40 hours a week and skipping school. She was taken to truancy court where she was ordered to return to school. When Cynthia was at court, a district administrator suggested that she apply to the alternative campus where she was accepted. At the time of the interview Cynthia was attending community college and had plans to attend a four-year school to study business.

Albert

Albert was 23-year-old, Hispanic male who dropped out of an alternative high school. He entered high school at the age of 15 and left at the age of 17. Albert attended traditional high school for two years and alternative high school for one year. Albert did not receive special education or LEP services. He passed state testing but was unsure about his end-of-course examination results. Albert was not retained at any grade level. He was suspended five times during his two years at the traditional high school and had attendance issues in high school. Cynthia and Albert are siblings.

After his family's business closed, Albert and his family moved to Texas from California. Albert shared that because he was about to become a father his father kicked him out of the family home. Albert began skipping school to work. He was taken to truancy court and ordered to return to school. Albert and the principal of the traditional high school argued and Albert refused to return to the school. Albert attended his sister Cynthia's interview for admission into the alternative high school and was accepted himself. He attended for a year, but was unable to hold down two full-time jobs and attend school at the same time. Albert continued his job at a fast food restaurant and became a manager. At the time of the interview Albert was taking classes to complete his high school degree and his two-year undergraduate degree with the support of the restaurant's franchise owner. Albert shared that he would like to attend a four-year college and earn a degree in business.

Suzanne

Suzanne was a 23-year-old Hispanic female who dropped out of an alternative high school. She entered high school at the age of 15 and left school at 16. She attended traditional high school for almost two years and was enrolled in an alternative high school, but did not attend. Suzanne did not receive special education or LEP services. Suzanne passed state testing, however she was not sure about her end-of-course examination results. Suzanne was neither retained nor suspended. Her attendance issues began in the eighth grade.

Suzanne's parents divorced when she entered high school. She described how her parents uprooted the family in the middle of the night, left their home, and moved to a hotel. Suzanne shared that when the family moved she and her sister lost the support they had felt from their church and small community. Suzanne became pregnant her junior year of high school; her high school counselor encouraged her to enroll at the alternative high school. Suzanne often missed school due to illness from the pregnancy. She completed her General Education Development (GED) certificate on her own. At the time of the interview Suzanne had obtained a two-year degree in business; she provided support to the chief finance officer of a major corporation.

Trey

Trey was a 21-year-old, White male who dropped out of an alternative school. He entered high school at the age of 15 and left school at 19. He attended the traditional high school for three years and the alternative high school for two years. Trey did not receive

special education or LEP services. Trey passed state and end-of-course examinations, was retained, and was not suspended. He had attendance issues in high school.

Trey entered the district in the second grade. He came from a single parent household and was an only child. Trey began skipping school the second semester of his junior year of high school. He shared that he had issues with the fact that he had earned a credit and a half sometime earlier in high school and was not awarded the credits. Trey was taken to truancy court and ordered back to school. He returned to the traditional high school only to repeat the same behaviors. At the beginning of what would have been his senior year of high school, a district administrator suggested to Trey that he should apply to the alternative high school. He attended the alternative high school but continued to have issues with not receiving the credits he felt he was due. At the time of the interview, Trey was employed at two fast food restaurants.

Nina

Nina was a 19-year-old, Hispanic female who dropped out of an alternative high school. She entered high school at the age of 14 and left school at 17. She attended the traditional high school for one year and the alternative high school for one year. Nina received no special education services but was coded as LEP. She did not pass state or end-of-course examinations. She was retained in the ninth grade, was suspended from school once, and had attendance issues in high school.

Nina's first year in the district was in fifth grade. She was from a single-parent household and had an older sister who did not enroll in high school. Nina, her mother, and her sister were undocumented, which appeared to add to the uncertainty of the

stability of the household. Nina withdrew from school during the eighth grade to attend school in Mexico. She returned to the U.S. the following year and entered high school at the traditional campus. When Nina was in the ninth grade, she was sent to the disciplinary campus for fighting. While attending the disciplinary campus, Nina became pregnant and was encouraged by a district administrator to attend the alternative high school. Nina felt that the traditional and alternative campuses did not do enough to bridge the language barrier between the teachers and students. At the time of the interview, Nina was studying for her GED in Spanish and worked as a server at an upscale restaurant.

Brandon

Brandon was a 20-year-old, White male who dropped out of an alternative high school. He entered high school at the age of 14 and left school at 19. He attended traditional high school for two years and alternative high school for three years. Brandon received special education services but no LEP services. He did not pass state or end-of-course examinations. Brandon was retained in the ninth grade and was suspended twice during his two years at the traditional high school. Brandon had attendance issues while in high school.

Brandon enrolled in the district in the first grade. He came from a single parent household; his mom and older brother graduated from the same alternative high school. Brandon began receiving special education services during elementary school. During middle school his grades began to drop. Brandon did not have good attendance during high school, however during his junior year of high school things began to take a turn for the worse. Brandon's special education teacher met with a district administrator to create

a plan for Brandon to enroll in an alternative high school. Brandon applied to the school, however his attendance was an issue and he was not accepted into the school until the last six weeks of his junior year. Brandon's girlfriend, who was expecting his child, also attended the alternative high school. Brandon shared that after the child was born he lost his motivation to attend school. At the time of the interview, Brandon was attending a charter school with the goal of completing his GED.

Patti

Patti was a White, female who had served as an educator for over 20 years. At the time of the study she was employed as the alternative campus director. Patti had earned a Ph.D. in Educational Leadership. Part of her duties included serving as director for the district's disciplinary campus. Patti also oversaw the disciplinary campus. All applications for the alternative campus came through Patti's office and she was the person who facilitated the applicants' interviews. Patti made the final decision about who would be admitted to the alternative campus. The alternative campus has its own state campus identification number, just like a traditional high school. The campus was held to the same state-mandated requirements as a traditional high school; however, the community did not appear to hold the campus to the same high standards since the majority of students who attended this campus were coded at-risk.

Steve

Steve was a White, male alternative campus counselor who had been employed as an educator for more than 15 years. He had earned a Master of Education Degree in School Counseling. Steve began his educational career as a teacher and then became a

counselor at the high school level. The alternative high school did not have an assistant principal, so Steve sometimes filled that role and assisting Patti in resolving discipline issues.

Judy

Judy was a White, female alternative campus teacher who had served as an educator at the secondary level for over 10 years. She had earned an undergraduate degree in general education and a graduate degree in educational leadership. She planned to pursue her doctoral degree. Judy taught history and filled in for Patti during student interviews when necessary. Judy began her teaching career at the traditional high school campus and then transferred to the alternative campus.

Donna

Donna was a White, female alternative campus teacher who was certified to teach special education. She earned had degrees in general education and special education. Donna had taught in the district for 10 years and at the alternative campus for three years. She began her career as a special education teacher at a traditional high school.

Amanda

Amanda was a White female alternative campus master teacher who had been teaching at the alternative campus for over 10 years. She had earned a degree in general education. Amanda served as a math instructor and tutored general education students throughout the district.

Themes

The essence of the phenomenon experienced in this study was one of resiliency for those students who graduated from the alternative high school and those students who earned a GED certificate after dropping out of the alternative high school. These students exhibited tenacity prior to attending the alternative high school, which was apparent in their willingness to work full-time jobs while attending high school. Staff at the alternative high school offered support for the graduates and those who dropped out.

The first theme was *relationships rather than programs led to the success of the alternative high school*. The two supporting subthemes for this theme were *substantial differences existed in the interaction between students and staff members at the traditional campus rather than at the alternative campus* and *the former students believed stereotyping occurred at the traditional high school*. The second theme was *the former students blamed push-out factors at the traditional high school for their disengagement*. One subtheme emerged to support this theme, *the former students lacked a sense of belonging at the traditional high school*. The third theme was *the former students exercised autonomy in their choices of whether pull-out factors would impact their decision to graduate or drop out*. One subtheme emerged to support this theme, *the former students took on adult roles which had an impact on their education*. The fourth theme was *personalized instruction supported student learning*. One subtheme emerged to support this theme was that *peer-to-peer instruction nurtured a learning environment through group projects*. The fifth theme to emerge from the data was *one-on-one*

advising supported the former students' curricular and life decisions. One subtheme emerged to support this theme, *the match between advisor and advisee was intentional.*

The first theme, relationships rather than programs led to the success of this alternative high school, illustrated the students' relatedness that is exemplified in self-determination theory. The former students had the need to establish a sense of mutual respect and reliance with others (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Harlow, 1958). The second theme, students blamed push-out factors at the traditional high 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 for an individual to experience choice and feel like the initiator of his or her actions (deCharms, 1968; Deci, 1975). The fourth theme, personalized instruction supported student learning, and the fifth theme, one-on-one advising supported students' curricular and life decisions, denoted the students' competence, as described in the last section of self-determination theory. Individuals have a need to attain the desired outcome at an optimally challenging task (Skinner, 1995; White, 1959).

Theme 1: 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 their fellow schoolmates. 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.

Cynthia described going to truancy court and the disappointment she felt in herself for her history of truancy and court summons. She explained at truancy court that she decided to change her behavior and made the decision to attend alternative high school. Cynthia described how her relationships with the staff and district personnel supported her throughout her time at the alternative high school. She shared that she wanted to attend a school like Passages, but that she “didn’t even know that there was such a thing.” Cynthia said, “I was really thankful...if it wasn’t for [Ms. Martinez] sending me to court I would be a high school dropout with 10 kids.”

Cynthia attributed her decision to attend and graduate from the alternative high school to the district and alternative high school staff members who gave her the opportunity to make a change. Reengagement strategies are intended to foster relationship building between caring adults and at-risk students in an effort to help students see their value (Archambault, Janosz, Fallu, & Pagani, 2009; Balfanz et al., 2015; Boylan & Renzulli, 2014; Cooper, 2013).

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 school. Tara shared that the strength in the campus existed in its people. She shared, “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. Other students

described the intense interview process and the support they received from a district staff member as making a difference.

Brothers Rick and Jim recalled that Ms. Martinez was there to guide them through the application and interview processes. Rick shared that he did not want to stay at his traditional high school and that Ms. Martinez told him repeatedly that she would be at his Passages interview and she 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,” said Rick. Jim stated, “Ms. Martinez pushed for us because she knew how much we hated going to the high school and that if we stayed there we were going to drop out, so it was the only shot we had at graduating.”

Albert described interactions with staff that kept him connected even though he did not graduate. Albert 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 ...Dr. Patti...was always telling my sister to get me to come back.” Nina challenged the effectiveness of the alternative high school for students who were not native English speakers. She did not feel support from the home campus, the district, or the alternative high school. Nina said that when she told Ms. Martinez that she was close to leaving school, Ms. Martinez she said that she was going to take her to court. Nina said that she her response to Ms. Martinez was, “I’m Mexican and we always look for different ways. I’m just gonna [sic] say I’m going back to Mexico and I know they’re gonna leave me alone...they don’t want me there, so they’re not gonna look for me.” Nina stated that that was in fact what occurred.. “No programs helped me. I don’t think they have programs, I don’t think that’s

the way they work....Programs are everywhere, but they don't know how to work with them, that's the thing," she said.

Building relationships with school staff can help students to reengage in their education (Archambault et al., 2009; Balfanz et al., 2015; Boylan & Renzulli, 2014; Cooper, 2013; Edwards & Edwards, 2007; Fall & Roberts, 2012; Henry, Knight, & Thornberry, 2012). Students who have developed relationships with school staff earlier in their educational career are less likely to become disengaged (Archambault et al., 2009; Balfanz et al., 2015; Boylan & Renzulli, 2014; Cooper, 2013; Edwards & Edwards, 2007; Fall & Roberts, 2012; Henry et al., 2012). The comments of the teacher and administrator participants supported those of the former students.

Alternative high school staff members seek to build relationships with students as a way to reengage them in their education (Archambault et al., 2009; Balfanz et al., 2015; Karcher, 2008; Rhodes, 2008; Rodriguez-Planas, 2012). In this study, half of the former student participants who reengaged by attending the alternative high school graduated and half of them did not.

Subtheme: Substantial differences existed between students' interactions and staff members

Students described interactions with staff members at the traditional high school as challenging and creating further disconnect while similar interactions between students and the alternative staff members were more engaging. When students dealt with attendance or behavior issues at the traditional high school there was no room for flexibility. At the alternative high school the students were held responsible for their

actions and they had to meet with staff to come up with solutions. Graduates Cynthia, Khalid, and Tara recounted an occasion during ninth grade when a school leader made a remark about how obviously ill-fitted they were for the traditional high school. Cynthia recounted a conversation she had with her counselor about which English course she should choose. She said that her counselor repeatedly asked her if she thought she could handle the level of coursework because “English was spoken all the time.” Cynthia shared, “I speak English all the time and I know Spanish too. I thought, ‘Wow, it wasn’t even me who wanted this, it was my middle school teacher who thought I should take higher level English classes to push myself.’”

Khalid recalled an assistant principal’s remarks regarding assimilation. Khalid shared that the administrator questioned whether Khalid should be at the school, and said that the administrator stated, “we have our own ways of doing things and you might find it hard to fit in.” Whether the assistant principal was trying to discriminate Khalid’s ethnicity or merely address his educational options, Khalid viewed the comments as an attempt to exclude him from the campus. Mello, Mallett, Andretta, and Worrell (2012) found that even a subtle manipulation of identity salience in a non-threatening context can activate a form a stereotype threat.

Tara recalled the reaction an assistant principal had when the counselor shared paperwork with her that indicated that Tara was homeless. Tara shared, “The look on her face was like, ‘Oh crap, not one of those kids.’ She never even spoke to me. She just spoke to the counselor, like I wasn’t even in the room.” Tara had become homeless in the ninth grade. When Tara brought an address change to the registrar she was informed that

she would need to provide new residency documentation. Tara shared that after she explained that she and her family were living with a family friend, the campus registrar informed her that she would have to change schools. Tara did not have her federal homeless rights explained to her. She noted that her family situation of homelessness contributed to her feelings of rejection from staff at the traditional high school. Tara shared her belief that the staff members at her second high school were not concerned that she did not fit in and that she was going through challenges in her family life. She said that her first high school did not inform her that she could have stayed there since she was homeless. “I guess they just felt like they got rid of a problem kid whenever I told them that we had moved in with my mom’s friend,” Tara said.

Dropouts Suzanne, Trey, and Albert reported similar conversations, and also spoke about attendance clerks and front office staff members who asked if the attendance notes their parents wrote had been forged. Suzanne recounted a conversation with a counselor about her pregnancy. The counselor told Suzanne that Suzanne would not feel comfortable at the traditional high school and that it would be best if Suzanne left. “I guess she meant to the alternative high school. I don’t know for sure, so I just left,” said Suzanne.

At many alternative high schools, pregnancy-related services are provided automatically to female students during pregnancy (Franklin, Streeter, Kim, & Tripodi, 2007; Hemmer, Madsen, & Torres, 2013; Kim, 2013; Lagana-Riordan et al., 2011; Lehr, Tan, & Ysseldyke, 2009; Streeter, Franklin, Kim, & Tripodi, 2010; Tyler & Lofstrom, 2009). The alternative campus the former students attended offered enrollment to male

and female students who were about to become parents as well as to students who already were parents. However, it was not mandatory that the current or soon-to-be parents attend the alternative school. Trey described an encounter with his high school counselor, and discussed trying to figure out how he could have changed the outcome. He said that he met with his counselor in the fall of his junior year to set his schedule for the fall of his senior year and that the counselor told him that he was two classes short of being a senior. Trey said that when he asked the counselor how that could be she told him that was his responsibility, not hers. "I asked if I could see my transcripts and she said I should have run them before I came in to see her and that we were there to build a schedule, so I just left," Trey said.

Albert related encounters between himself and his traditional high school campus administrators. He said that on his first day of his freshman year he was standing in the front of the building when the first bell rang when a man walked up to him and told him that if he did give him his phone he would have to leave. Albert said he told the man, "I don't even know you, and you don't pay my bill, why aren't you telling them the same thing?" and to a group of girls who had their phones out. Albert said the man responded, "I'm talking to you, that's why" and assigned Albert to in-school suspension on the first day. Albert said he later found out that the man was the school principal. On another occasion, shared Albert, the assistant principal saw him in the hall on the phone and told him, "Hey, look, you know you need to put that away and get to class, we need you learning today." Albert said that he obeyed. "It wasn't hard; he just treated me with respect," Albert said.

The former students described an expectation of personal responsibility at the alternative high school. Interactions between staff members and students stemmed from the understanding that students were responsible for their behaviors and decisions inside and outside of school. Staff members at the alternative high school supported students' good choices and help students work through poor choices. The staff members recognized that the students were making adult decisions; therefore the students were treated as adults. Jim recounted a conversation he and Rick had with Dr. Patti regarding their tardies. He said that Dr. Patti told him, "I'm not happy and you know why so tell me how you're gonna [sic] fix it." Jim shared, "It was pretty early on in us going to Passages so I didn't trust anybody and I could tell that Rick was nervous. I think we both knew this was our best bet to graduate." Rick said that he told Dr. Patti, "We just need to go back to my mom's so we can get here on time every day" and Dr. Patti replied, "Make it happen." According to Rick, "And that was that."

Expectations for attendance were set at the interview. When the brothers began arriving late and a meeting was called, there was no question about the topic of the meeting. Initially, Brandon described receiving support and experiencing teamwork when his advisor spoke with him about the work needed to complete his courses. When Brandon was not completing work, he said that the staff gave up on him. Brandon described his interactions with his advisor. He said that when he started attending Passages his advisor met with him and encouraged him by talking with him about what he needed to do to graduate. "As time went on and I didn't get things done I guess they all got tired of me and just gave up on me," Brandon said.

Brandon stopped exhibiting autonomy over his behavior; as time passed he blamed the teachers and staff for giving up on him for his lack of work. Nina was the only student who stated that at both the traditional and alternative campuses she was neither heard nor supported:

The principal...never listened to me about those other girls bullying me. He never did anything about it. When I hit back, I was in trouble, not the other girls. They didn't get sent (to the behavior campus), it was just me. That's not right. Then I'm at Passages...when I asked the principal for help...she told me, "I'm not a teacher, you need to ask a teacher." Why she tell [sic] me to come to her if I have any questions then if she not going to help me?

Subtheme: Students believed stereotyping occurred

The former students believed typecasting or stereotyping occurred at the traditional high school. They described remarks of teachers, counselors, assistant principals and office staff that categorized them by ethnicity, gender, and socioeconomic indicators rather than as individuals. Cynthia recalled interactions with counselor, teachers, and other staff members that occurred while she was completing her application to the alternative high school. She said that Dr. Patti told her she needed to have three weeks of perfect attendance at her traditional high school to show her level of commitment before she could apply to Passages. Cynthia said that after she had fulfilled the attendance requirement the teachers at her traditional high school said, "You shouldn't go to the alternative high school; you should stay here. You know the alternative high school is for students who don't fit here and now you fit." Cynthia said

that when she was not attending school, no one reached out to her. “None of these teachers cared why I wasn’t there. They still didn’t care, it’s just now I was the model student and I fit, but what happens later when I don’t fit again?” she shared. Albert reported how his initial interactions with teachers at the traditional campus worsened over time. He described himself as a “tall, brown kid with a hard to pronounce last name” and said, “teachers thought they knew who and what I was before I opened my mouth.” Albert shared that at the traditional high school teachers told him, “Oh, you’re a smart kid but you’re not gonna [sic] make it in life the way you are.”

Theme 2: Push-out Factors Were a Cause for Disengagement

The second theme to emerge focused on systemic and campus culture factors that led to student disengagement. The former students blamed push-out factors at the traditional high school their disengagement. They perceived being dismissed and rejected from the traditional high school. The former students reported a lack of communication with traditional high school staff members that caused a further breakdown in their school engagement. Some of the staff behaviors were systemic, such as zero tolerance policies that cause students to be assigned to ISS after a pre-determined number of absences. Other behaviors were described by the former students as part of the campus culture, such as students being assigned to ISS without clear and methodical processes for students to recapture lost learning and that led to loss of additional course credits.

Push-out factors described by the participants included zero tolerance policies such as repeatedly being assigned to in-school and out-of-school suspension for high absenteeism, repeatedly being assigned to the disciplinary campus, and being sent to

truancy court. The former students shared that these practices led to their course and test failure, which ultimately resulted in loss of credits and grade retention. The former students reported feeling uncomfortable with approaching counselors or administrators with outside life issues that were obstructing their educational goals. Students noted language barriers as an additional obstacle to connecting with schools.

Subtheme: Students lacked a sense of belonging

Students lacked a sense of belonging at the traditional high school. *Sense of belonging* is defined by Boylan and Renzulli (2014) as a multidimensional concept that includes teacher-student relationships, order and discipline, and perceived exclusion and privilege. Researchers have chronicled campus cultures that contribute to students' perceptions of belonging as having both positive and negative impact on student engagement (Kane, 2006; Slee, 1986; Suh, Suh, & Houston, 2007; Zhang, Willson, Katsiyannis, Barrett, Ju, & Wu, 2010). All of the former student participants reported that push-out factors from the traditional high school caused their disengagement. The former students reported that they felt a lack of belonging at the traditional high school.

Graduates and dropouts described a detachment from the traditional high school that went beyond attendance. The former students described feeling frustrated when they attempted to address issues that caused their disengagement with administrators at the traditional high school. The former students were told that it was their fault for not following the rules or waiting too long to ask for help. Graduates Rick, Jim, and Tara shared that their experiences for their respective traditional high school never matched up to their expectations. When Rick and Jim attempted to speak with the assistant principal

about attendance, the assistant principal called them derogatory names like “losers who don’t value education.” Tara spoke about not connecting at either of the traditional high schools she attended. Rick shared that while attending a traditional high school he was encouraged by teachers and principals to attend extra-curricular activities. When Rick told them he was not interested, the teachers and administrators would remind him of the different activities he could join. When he would refuse and tell them he wanted to skateboard, Rick said they told him, “The world is not going to change to meet your needs, you need to change to fit into the world.” Rick shared, “There was nothing there for me to be a part of and they didn’t even try to bring us on the fringes into the fold.”

Jim recalled that an assistant principal told him that skateboarding was for drug users. He said he told the assistant principal, “how skateboarding had become a real sport and that it was a big industry like dirt bike racing.” However, Rick said that the assistant principal walked away. Tara said that she never felt connected with anyone at either of the traditional high schools she attended. She shared that as she went from traditional campus to traditional campus she never felt like she fit. Tara said she believed that her home situation may have impacted her feelings. “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 that it was just too much work,” Tara stated.

Students who become disengaged in school describe small occasions that snowball as well as larger events that influence their decision to leave school (Archambault et al., 2009; Balfanz et al., 2015; Boylan & Renzulli, 2014). Researchers have indicated that it is difficult for some students to pinpoint the exact behaviors of

campus staff that led to their feelings disconnection, but that that does not mean that the behaviors did not exist (Boylan & Renzulli, 2014; Bradley & Renzulli, 2011; Clark, Ponjuan, Orrock, Wilson, & Flores, 2013; Panferov, 2010; McNeal, 1997; Shim, 2013).

In this study, many of the former student participants could name the behaviors that led to their detachment and frustration. Suzanne shared that in junior high, when “class was just too painful and things were bad at home,” she became physically ill when she thought about attending class. When she was in the eighth grade, Suzanne started hiding in the girl’s bathroom for the entire school day. Suzanne said, “Hiding in the bathroom stall with my feet up so no one would know I was in there and then at the end of the day go home. And then in high school I skipped more.” Nina recalled that during high school her mother often was angry at her, but her mother also was mad at the way Nina was treated at school. According to Nina, when her mother would go to the school to try to meet with faculty, school personnel would make her wait for long periods of time. Nina shared, “That’s not right because they have Spanish teachers there and I could talk for her but they wouldn’t let me. And when they did have teachers tell her things, they tell [sic] her wrong.”

Theme 3: Students Exercised Autonomy in Decision Making

Students exercised autonomy in their choices of whether pull-out factors would impact their decision to graduate or dropout. Pull-out factors are another aspect of disengagement and can manifest themselves in students’ behaviors, reactions, and decisions (Boylan & Renzulli, 2014; Bradley & Renzulli, 2011; McNeal, 1997). Pull-out factors include needing to work in order to contribute to the financial stability of the

family, becoming a parent, or becoming homeless (Boylan & Renzulli, 2014; Bradley & Renzulli, 2011; McNeal, 1997). Autonomy is a central element within self-determination theory and represents the manifestation of a perceived internal locus of control for one's actions (Deci & Ryan, 1985). The former students reported that when it was time to commit to graduating or dropping out, they made the final decision. The former students took on adult roles, which had an impact on their education.

Cynthia described how her father's addiction forced her to work full time, which kept her from attending a traditional school. Scheduling at the alternative campus allowed Cynthia both to work and attend school. Cynthia said that she was aware of her father's addiction and that she had to serve as the supporter of her family. She started working at a fast food restaurant when she was 15. Cynthia's store manager was aware of her situation and scheduled her to work for 40 hours a week. Cynthia shared that because of what was going on with her family she was unable to pay attention in class and could not complete homework because she could not concentrate in class. "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," said Cynthia. Cynthia shared that during her junior year at Passages she was allowed to attend school from 7:30 a.m.-12:30 p.m. so that she could work. On her days off she attended school all day. "They even had a class that I received credit for working," said Cynthia.

Cynthia described pull-out factors that caused her to leave the traditional high school and shared how those factors were addressed at the alternative high school when her schedule was changed and she was awarded course credit for work study. Researchers

have shown that some alternative high schools work within the system to address students' needs, while some traditional high schools are locked into more stringent processes that restrict the ability to be flexible to address individual student needs (Anderson, Leventhal, & Dupéré, 2014; Bloom & Unterman, 2014; Boylan & Renzulli, 2014; Doll et al., 2013; Fall & Roberts, 2012).

Rick shared that he decided that he was going to graduate and that the alternative high school was the most logical place to achieve that goal. Rick said, "There wasn't one thing; it was more like a lot of little things...that had happened when I realized I had decided I was going to graduate no matter what." According to Rick, 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." Rick 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 shared that he was determined to cast off negative perceptions in order to achieve his goal of graduation. 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 Dr. Patti dished out, but I was going to graduate."

Albert did not graduate, but was motivated to dispel the negative perception he believed that others had of him. Albert 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 like man even if I do drop out, I’m gonna [sic] make much more than that... I’m gonna prove them wrong.” While at Passages Albert’s father kicked him. Albert attended Passages for a year. “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,” said Albert. 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.

Brandon described his interactions at the traditional and alternative campuses. He got behind in middle school and never felt like he could catch up. He said that when he was younger he was treated the same as other students but that that changed as he got older. “They started treating me different and making me go to special classes. The other kids made fun of me and they never did anything about it,” said Brandon. While attending Passages, Brandon and his girlfriend had a baby. When the baby was born he was not finished with his coursework. Brandon said that the director told him, “wouldn’t it be best if you went and got your GED so I [sic] could support my family, so I left.”

Nina said she did not trust anyone at the traditional high school or the alternative high school, which led to her disengagement and eventual dropping out of school. She shared that teachers at her traditional high school were not aware that she worked and that when she acted tired in class it was 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. That's no good for us...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.

The teacher and administrator participants responded similarly to the former students.

Subtheme: Students took on adult roles

Students took on adult roles, which impacted their education. The former students reported working 40 hours a week, becoming parents, and difficulties with navigating the educational system to self-advocate for services that could impact their education. The former students shared that their parents either were carrying resentments from their own interactions with the educational system 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 recalled her reasons for working 40-hour weeks. She said her father was a cocaine addict and was not working. She and her younger sister would come home from school and find that the water and electricity had been disconnected. "My father would be there on the sofa. I had to work...I didn't want my mom to work, she had never worked outside the home...I wanted to help her and do everything I could to help my family," said Cynthia. She worked 40 hours a week to pay to help pay the family's bills. "If I was too tired to go to school, well I was too tired," she shared.

It can be a good survival instinct for students to take on the role of parent when one or both of their parents become incapacitated, however when it occurs during the high school years it can lead a student to drop out (Bloom & Unterman, 2014; Boylan & Renzulli, 2014; Doll et al., 2013; Dupéré et al., 2014; Fall & Roberts, 2012). When Suzanne and her family moved into a new state in the middle of her freshman year, the family resided in a hotel. Suzanne was unable to complete many of her homework assignments. She shared that she was too embarrassed to go to the counselor to explain her family's situation and that her mom was not emotionally well enough to advocate for her children.

Middle and high school teachers may assume that students who enter their classes know how to advocate for their needs, speak up when they do not understand subject material, attend tutorials, and take responsibility for their own learning (Bloom & Unterman, 2014; Boylan & Renzulli, 2014; Doll et al., 2013; Dupéré et al., 2014; Fall & Roberts, 2012; Payne, 2008). In education, there is a systemic belief that if a breakdown occurs in learning, the responsibility lies with the student (Bloom & Unterman, 2014; Boylan & Renzulli, 2014; Doll et al., 2013; Dupéré et al., 2014; Fall & Roberts, 2012; Payne, 2008). If a student does not learn how to communicate his or her needs, an issue can snowball from the inability to complete homework to disengagement and ultimately dropping out of school (Bloom & Unterman, 2014; Boylan & Renzulli, 2014; Doll et al., 2013; Dupéré et al., 2014; Fall & Roberts, 2012; Payne, 2008). This was exhibited in the experiences of Trey who struggled with articulating his needs at the traditional high school regarding his missing credits. The conflict carried over to the alternative high

school, ultimately resulting in Trey dropping out of school. Brandon, who had received special educational services since middle school, was unable to get the support he needed to complete the minimum course credits required to complete high school.

Theme 4: Personalized Instruction Supported Student Learning

Personalized instruction supported student learning through sustaining individualized and small group learning communities designed for student success. 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 the students to apply classroom learning to real-world problems. Students are less likely to become disengaged when they are in smaller classes and when the curricula is applicable to their lives (Almeida, Steinberg, Santos, & Le, 2010; Balfanz et al., 2015; Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Bloom & Unterman, 2014; Freeman, Simonsen, McCoach, Sugai, Lombardi, & Homer, 2015; Iachini, Buettner, Anderson-Butcher, & Reno, 2013; Perry, Liu, & Pabian, 2010).

School staff can increase student engagement by developing lessons that apply to current events (Archambault et al., 2009; Balfanz et al., 2015; Bridgeland, DiIulio, & Morison, 2006; Gonzales, Wong, Toomey, Millsap, Dumka, & Mauricio, 2014; Henry et al., 2012; Iachini et al., 2013; Janosz, Archambault, Morizot, & Pagani, 2008). Khalid described how working one-on-one with teachers helped with his language barriers. When he needed help his teachers would read a passage or problem to him and help him figure out the answer. Khalid shared that the alternative school staff 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 who spent time guiding him through the coursework.

Many U.S. high schools have adopted non-traditional block schedules to allow for a longer instructional time in an effort to support student learning (Doll et al., 2013; Iachini et al., 2013; Neild, 2009). Like the traditional 45-minute schedule, the 90-minute non-traditional schedule works well for some students and not for others (Doll et al., 2013; Iachini et al., 2013; Neild, 2009).

Rick described how having smaller classes benefitted him more than his experience on the block schedule did. He said he appreciated the smaller class sizes and schedule. Trey spoke about smaller classes being helpful even though he did not graduate. He said that when he enrolled at Passages he was about a year and a half behind, not counting the credit and a half he felt he had earned but had not received. He stated, "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."

Trey's experience indicates the autonomy alternative schools have in building individual learning programs to support student growth (Aron, 2006; Dupper, 2006; Kim, 2011; Lagana-Riordan et al., 2011; Lange & Sletten, 2002; Slaten, Irby, Tate, & Rivera, 2015). The teacher and administrator responses supported the former students' responses.

Subtheme: Peer-to-peer instruction encourages learning

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 group. In a cooperative learning setting, students are given responsibilities to master portions or sections of a project and then teach what they learned to the group. This encourages individual ownership of their learning (Booyesen & Grosser, 2014; Thapa, Cohen, Guffey & Higgins-D'Alessandro, 2013). Cynthia recalled how in elementary school students were placed in groups assigned jobs. She shared that a similar process was used at the alternative school to help students learn to work together. Tara recounted that at Passages she experienced cooperative learning for the first time. Tara's experience with cooperative learning helped her to generalize what she learned working in groups to working with people outside of school. She was pleased with the support her classmates provided. "There was always so much movement and interaction between us students I really learned how to work with other people," shared Tara.

Jim shared that he did not like how traditional school was teacher-based. He said that at the alternative school students were assigned large projects and were allowed to "work in teams and all subjects at one time." According to Jim, Passages 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. The teacher and administrator participants' responses supported the former students' comments.

Theme 5: One-on-one Advisors

One-on-one advising supported students' in their curricular and life decision making. The alternative high school had an intentional advising and mentoring aspect. The former students shared that 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 education and career goals.

Mentoring can lead to a greater connectedness to culturally different peers and hopefulness among elementary aged boys, and connectedness to culturally different peers, self-esteem, and support from friends among high school aged girls (Karcher, 2008; Rhodes, 2008; Rodriguez-Planas, 2012). The mentor/student matches made at Passages were intentional. 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.

Tara shared other helpful experiences with her advisor. She said that the campus director matched students with "someone who understands where you're coming from." Tara described her advisor: "She didn't pity me, or expect less because of my life situation; she taught me how to use my experiences to my benefit." Tara shared that her

advisor was the first person to point out that if her traditional campus had given her the homeless paperwork she might not have ended up at Passages. “She said I should use every experience to move forward, somehow, and I think that’s when I first thought about attending college to study social work,” said Tara. Rick explained how he felt that his advisor cared for him on a personal level: “He 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.” Rick shared that he valued the guidance his advisor gave him about his academic work; however, he also valued his advisor’s willingness to be personal with him about his behavior outside of school.

Cynthia recalled the helpful, at-ease relationships with her advisor and with other teachers. She said that if she needed to, she could talk with them about both school and home issues. She shared what was going on at home with one particular teacher:

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 like 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 home life. She sought guidance and reassurance from her teachers in her decisions and for the goals she was setting for herself after high school.

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.” The majority of former students felt that the assistance provided by advisors went beyond coursework support and that advisors helped them with set and achieve goals for school, work, and life after school. The former students credited their advising relationships with helping them reengage in school. Teacher and administrator participants’ responses supported the former students’ comments.

Subtheme: Match between advisor and advisee was intentional

The former students shared that they were asked questions during their alternative school placement interview about their personality and about how they preferred to interact with others. The former students were told that they would work with a teacher who would advise them on their coursework and help them understand the campus culture. Khalid was surprised to learn that he would not have negative repercussions for acknowledging there was not a good fit with his initial advisor. He said that during his interview he told Dr. Patti that he did not care which advisor he was assigned. The advisor to whom he was assigned suggested a change. Khalid said that the advisor told him, “So do you think it might be better if you work with Ms. East instead of me because I don’t think this is working as well as it could?” Khalid expressed surprise that he could change advisors and was surprised that his initial advisor suggested doing so. “I didn’t believe it...she wasn’t mad or anything. She didn’t treat me different in class; she just really wanted me to do good [sic],” he said.

Rick described how Dr. Patti placed him and his brother with different advisors. She shared, “I think she [Dr. Patti] saw...that I needed more guidance than he did. She put me with Mr. Graves and he and I got along real well. He like pushed me in the right ways.” Trey recalled that during his interview he was asked if he wanted a male advisor. He shared, “I thought that was kinda [sic] weird, like why would that matter. But...they matched me with Mr. Green I really liked him. He was quiet like me so we didn’t have to talk a lot but we communicated just fine.” Although the former students did not seem to understand why their personalities and preferences on advisor/mentor relationships were discussed during the interview process, they were able to see how the advisor/mentor relationship contributed to their reengagement in attending the alternative high school.

Research Questions

Themes emerged that captured the perception of students responses concerning if and how an alternative high school affected the participants’ decision to graduate or drop out. The face-to-face interviews provided information specific to each individual’s lived experiences and also contributed to a broader understanding of student disengagement, reengagement, and the role alternative high schools play in reengaging at-risk high school students.

Research Question 1

The first research question focused on how the former students perceived that their alternative high school experiences affected their autonomy. The former students blamed push-out factors at the traditional high school for their disengagement. They reported systemic staff behaviors such as zero tolerance policies requiring placement of

students in ISS for high absenteeism and campus culture behaviors such as a lack of processes for the students assigned to ISS to recapture lost learning and credits. The former students said that these contributed to their disengagement.

Push-outs are students who are overrepresented in disciplinary and special education placements and lag behind their grade-level peers (Boylan & Renzulli, 2014; Bradley & Renzulli, 2011; McNeal, 1997). Boylan and Renzulli (2014) posited that students who are assigned repeatedly to disciplinary campuses for disruptive classroom behaviors become disengaged in school and drop out. Khalid, Rick, Jim, Albert, and Brandon were assigned repeatedly to a disciplinary campus during their time at the traditional high school. Khalid, Rick, and Jim graduated from the alternative high school; however Albert and Brandon did not.

Khalid commented about ISS, “I didn’t know what it was, but it was in the library and the teachers there helped me, so I kinda [sic] wanted to just stay there.” Rick, Jim, Albert, and Brandon were assigned to ISS as early as the ninth grade. Rick shared, “The teachers are supposed to send your daily work so that you won’t get behind, but that doesn’t happen....Kids just get behind and there isn’t a way to stay on level with your classwork.” Jim spoke about being assigned to ISS with his older brother, but neither of them attended. He said, “No one care if we went or not.” Albert described his experiences in ISS. He said that he was angered by the way the principal treated him and other Hispanic kids differently than the White students. “It was really unfair and he didn’t hide it at all. The standards were different for different kids and that made me dig in my heels” said Brandon. Brandon shared that sometimes he asked to go to the lab, then left school

“Nobody checked, but weeks later they would send me back because I had skipped,” he said.

Researchers have shown that timelier and more appropriate consequences for initial infractions can decrease the likelihood of repeat disruptive behaviors, decrease the second and third placements in the disciplinary campus, and increase student engagement (Boylan & Renzulli, 2014; Bradley & Renzulli, 2011; McNeal, 1997). Another push-out factor identified in this study was repeated failures. Knesting (2008) found that grade stipulation requirements can cause students to be retained in the ninth grade. Trey, Nina, and Brandon were retained in high school and did not graduate. Trey described being frustrated with both the traditional and alternative campuses for not awarding him the credits he believed he had earned. Nina felt that she was held back by the language barriers between herself and the teachers at the traditional and alternative campuses. Trey, Nina, and Brandon expressed exasperation with Dr. Patti and the way she ran the alternative high school.

High absenteeism is another example of a push-out factor and a factor that was discussed by most of the former student participants in this study. Cynthia described how the experience of truancy court changed her outlook; it was the catalyst to encourage her to attend the alternative high school.

The graduates and dropouts described a detachment between themselves and the staff at the traditional high school. Rick, Jim, Suzanne, and Tara discussed how they and their families were treated. Rick recounted that his principal called him a loser. “I guess he thought that he was motivating me or something. All he was doing was pissing me off.

I just stayed away even more,” he said. Jim described his disconnect as being more systemic:

I wouldn't say one interaction alone, but a whole lot of little ones caused me to disconnect. Like being sent to ISS over and over again for skipping school. That's just stupid. If a kid doesn't come to school...does it make sense...when...you send them to ISS?

Suzanne spoke about parenthood and not being able to advocate for herself. She shared, “I never felt like the teachers saw me or pulled me out, or noticed me enough to pull me out and get me involved...I definitely felt disconnected.” Tara recalled a time her mother went to the traditional high school campus. After her mother was kept waiting because she had not make an appointment, Suzanne told a staff member “Look, my mom is really in a bad place here. We're homeless and she doesn't know when she'll have the time to make it back up here, is there any way she can meet with my assistant principal?” Suzanne said that the staff member told her that the assistant principals were busy that day.

Students described a sense of detachment from the traditional campus as a result of the treatment of office staff members, teachers, and campus administrators and as a lack of willingness to meet with the student and/or his or her family to discuss ways to fix or reengage the student in his or her education. The former students exercised autonomy in their choices of whether pull-out factors would impact their decision to graduate or drop out from the alternative high school. Pull-outs were defined as students who were compelled to leave school by outside forces (Boylan & Renzulli, 2014; Bradley &

Renzulli, 2011; McNeal, 1997). Boylan and Renzulli (2014) posited that outside forces such as having to work or becoming a parent cause students to be pull-outs.

Two sets of siblings participated in the study. The first set, Cynthia and Albert, shared many of the same pull-out factors: mobility, moving from one state to another, and having to work to help support the family. Albert was older, became a parent while in school, and dropped out. Cynthia was younger, did not become a parent, and graduated. Both former students worked at least 40 hours per week while attending high school. Their stories were very similar, except that Albert became a parent. Albert shared that parenting and working two jobs were the pull-out factors that contributed to his decision to leave high school. Albert's father kicked him out when he found out Albert's girlfriend was pregnant. Albert said he did not tell school staff. "I thought it was my business and I was responsible, so I just needed to do what I needed to do," he said. Albert worked two jobs while he tried to earn his high school diploma. "I did that...for a year and I just got to the point where something had to give and it ended up being school," he said.

The second set of siblings was Rick and Jim. The brothers shared the same pull-out factors. Rick admittedly skipped school at the traditional high school and felt responsible for his brother's poor attendance. During their middle school years, their parents divorced. When they entered high school, neither student had to work, and were able to attend the alternative high school together. Rick graduated first and Jim graduated the year after. Rick shared his experiences at the high schools. At the traditional high school he said he felt like he was "being shaped" into what they wanted him to be. "It didn't matter what my interests were, or even what I was good at, but just what I need to

finish to get through my coursework and graduate, not learn anything. So I stopped going,” said Rick. Rick’s younger brother skipped school with him. Rick shared, “At the alternative high school, it was different, but I felt like they were too involved with kids’ personal lives outside of school. Dr. Patti would check Facebook on Monday morning to see what we posted. That’s just not right.” Rick said he believed: “As long as we were getting our work done and following the rules inside the school, our outside life was just that, our outside life.”

Jim spoke about the choices he made while a student at the traditional and alternative campuses. When he was at the traditional high school he said his parents “were in a bad place” and he “just wanted control somewhere.” Jim shared, “I guess I thought I had control over myself at school. Not going to class seemed like a way for me to be independent; it just didn’t end up that way.” While attending the alternative high school, Jim said he saw how Dr. Patti treated his brother and he decided that he “decided to make different choices...this time. I didn’t need to like what was going on, but I needed to learn how to play the system better than I did at the traditional high school.”

Researchers have indicated that in order to be successful students need a voice in their education (Archambault et al., 2009; Balfanz et al., 2015; Bridgeland et al., 2006; Gonzales et al., 2014; Henry et al., 2012; Iachini et al., 2013; Janosz et al., 2008; Karcher, 2008; Rhodes, 2008; Rodriguez-Planas, 2012). At the traditional high school, Rick and Jim felt that they did not have a voice.

The former students took on adult roles, which had an impact on their education. Working a 40-hour week, having parental responsibilities, and being overwhelmed with

the intricacies of the educational system were reasons that the former students shared as being detrimental to their ability to advocate for their needs. Khalid's father traveled between the U.S. and Morocco, so he had to get a job to help pay the family's bills. Nina said that becoming a mom made her life more complicated. When she became pregnant her mom said she had to work, so she found a job. "But it was hard...because all the work I could do was waitress. So I got tired all the time, so I didn't want to go to school," said Nina. According to Nina, school staff did not understand that she had to work. "So after everything I just left school, because we had to eat," she shared. The former students indicated that the immediacy of adult situations outweighed the necessity to obtain a high school diploma.

Research Question 2

The second research question focused on how students that perceived their alternative high school experiences affected their competence. Students are more engaged in smaller classes and to curricula that can be applied to their current life situations (Almeida et al., 2010; Balfanz et al., 2015; Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Bloom & Unterman, 2014; Freeman et al., 2015; Iachini et al., 2013; Perry et al., 2010). The former students described spending more time working in groups on projects that encompassed multiple subjects to create finished products and were graded in all areas, which to them seemed more like the *real world*. Albert shared, "at the alternative high school you're each at a different level...maybe one of you is in English I-A and the other is in English I-B so the teacher has to teach you individually at the beginning to get you started and then you just keep going with your own work." Trey shared, "I kinda [sic] liked being

able to know just what I needed to do to get done....We all had our own work, even though we could work together, if that makes sense.” The former students expressed satisfaction in working closely with their teachers, even when the instruction was for only a short period of time.

The former students explained how working in collaborative groups forced each to become experts on a particular part of the project. They felt ownership of their own learning and responsible for their team’s learning. Nina shared, “At my old school the other kids would laugh at me because I didn’t speak English like them and the teachers didn’t do anything about it. The kids here....didn’t laugh and they tried to help each other.”

All of the former students reported that many outside life issues tended to come up during conversations with their advisors that led both parties to share beliefs, struggles, and develop plans and goals for the future. Jim recalled interactions with his advisor. After his brother completed school at Passages, Jim said his advisor told him he “couldn’t let up” and needed to continue attending school and finish too. “I guess maybe he thought I would give up or that I needed motivating. It got to the point where I even talk to him about things that were going on in my personal life,” said Jim.

Cynthia shared, “I never felt judged. I could speak with Ms. East about anything. I think she could even tell when I was scared; I didn’t have to tell her, she would just start telling me...things were going to be okay.” Tara said that her advisor was always there when she needed her. Tara said that her advisor checked on her. “There were times that she would walk up during class and just put her hand on my shoulder, I know it sounds

stupid but I felt real support,” she shared. Three other participants, Trey, Nina, and Brandon, described their advisors *going through the motions* and shared that the relationship was not very helpful.

The graduates and dropouts described the emphasis that was placed on making connections with advisors and meeting with advisors at least once a week. Trey spoke about his interaction with his advisor: “They assign you an advisor who they think you might have things in common with....But a lot of times you end up talking about all kinds of things, like life.” Brandon’s reaction was somewhat different. He said he felt that when his girlfriend was at Passages everyone liked him better. “After she had the baby and she finished they just kept pushing me...They just kept saying I should be finished and if I wasn’t I should leave, so I did,” said Brandon.

When Suzanne was pregnant she did not find out about the benefits afforded to her by attending an alternative high school. She dropped out of school. Suzanne shared, “I had no idea at the time to set goals, no concepts of tomorrow, of cause and effect. It was just survival. It was literally just day-to-day survival; I didn’t know there was a future.

Research Question 3

The third research question focused on how the former students’ perceptions of their alternative high school experiences affected their relatedness. Relationships rather than programs led to the success of Passages. Graduates and dropouts attributed the success of the alternative high school to people, not programs. Students described having a mutual respect for the staff and the other students at the alternative high school. Sharing

experiences with other students and being treated as an adult by the staff contributed to the former students' overall relatedness of their experiences at the alternative high school.

Most of the former students shared that they perceived that their relationships with the staff of the alternative high school were based on support and respect, regardless of whether they graduated or dropped out. Cynthia recalled, "They just helped me get my high school diploma that I needed....I am so thankful for Dr. Patti and all the teachers there." Albert spoke about his interactions with the staff. He said he always felt like he could talk with them and did not "feel judged or looked down on at the alternative campus" like at the traditional high school. Albert felt like he was treated like an adult. "Don't get me wrong, they really fought to get me back when I left, and no, I didn't tell them why at the time, but it was different than my old school," said Albert. Khalid shared that he was helped most by Dr. Patti and Ms. Martinez. He said that neither gave up on him and that Ms. Martinez made home visits to talk with his mom, who did not speak English. "She would come and my mom would call my sister and my sister would tell my mom what Ms. Martinez was saying. She really didn't want me to quit. She treated me with respect like I wasn't a kid," shared Khalid. Tara described the feeling of family at the campus: "You get really close with the other students, as well as your teachers. The teachers...push you, but so do your friends. You want to do better for each other, and for your family." The former students articulated a feeling of relatedness, or concern with their need to establish a sense of mutual respect and reliance with others.

Interactions between students and traditional high school staff members created further disengagement from school while similar interactions with the alternative high

school staff members were more inclusive and reengaging for students. Substantial differences existed in the interaction between students and staff members at the traditional compared to the alternative campus. Students recounted occasions at the traditional high school where they experienced exclusion and rejection from teachers, counselors, and administrators. They followed those depictions by describing similar situations that occurred at the alternative high school but that had very different outcomes. The former students expressed that the difference was in whether the campus wanted them or not.

The former students remarked on the ease with which they were able to converse with the staff members at the alternative high school versus the difficulties that existed between themselves and the staff members at the traditional high school. Cynthia shared that she felt that her traditional high school staff did not care if she attended “until it came time to go to truancy court.” She shared that no one called, checked on her or her brother, or asked how they could help. But after Cynthia started attending Passages, she said that Dr. Patti and Ms. Martinez cared about and they always checked on them. “Dr. Patti would call me into her office just to talk to me and Ms. Martinez would stop in once a week to see how we were doing,” said Cynthia. She also shared that Dr. Martinez went to her brother’s work to try to convince him to return to school.

Albert spoke being spoken to versus being spoken with; he shared that at the traditional high school “the principal would have a conversation about you standing right in front of you like you weren’t even there. You weren’t a part of the conversation.” Albert said that when he started attending Passages he thought the same thing was going

to happen, but it did not. “One time Dr. Patti and Ms. Martinez wanted to talk to me and we all sat around the table, so I just sat there, and they waited on me to say what was going on. That was real different,” he said.

Rick and Jim spoke about a relationship outside of the campus that kept them engaged in school. Rick shared that Ms. Martinez really watched over him and his brother. “Don’t get me wrong, when I made the choice to go to Passages and finish high school there was no turning back, but there were times when we felt like only Ms. Martinez our parents were behind us,” he said. Jim explained that it was difficult for him and his brother to change their attendance habits. “My brother and I would run around during the day and now we were going to school. Ms. Martinez would come and meet with us weekly just to break up the routine. Having her support was really helpful,” said Jim. Tara shared that at the traditional campus the front office clerk would not allow her to make an appointment with her assistant principal unless Tara would tell the clerk about the topic she wanted to discuss with the assistant principal. “Sometimes I felt like she was just wanting to know my business like it was just gossip. But...the alternative high school...was more of an open door policy. I mean sure we couldn’t just wander around, but it wasn’t...rigid,” said Tara.

The graduates and dropouts shared that remarks made by campus administrators, counselors, teachers, and office staff that characterized them negatively by ethnicity, gender, and socioeconomic status contributed to their disengagement. Khalid shared,

With all the political issues in the world right now, people just don’t want people like me at their schools. If I even got mad or spoke in my native language people

would just stare at me, like everybody, teachers, and kids. That's why I tried so hard to learn English. It just didn't seem to matter. I was different.

Cynthia recalled that the counselor who rebuked her for trying to take a higher-level English class said that she needed to meet Cynthia's parents. "When I told her I wasn't sure if they could come she said something about Hispanics not valuing education. That's just so wrong," said Cynthia.

Nina shared that she felt bullied by other girls at the traditional campus. The girls followed her in the hallways and told she needed to go clean their houses after school. Nina said she told the principal but he did not do anything. Nina told my mother who came to school. "They just make her wait all day and they do [sic] nothing because we're Mexican and they think we shouldn't be here anyway [sic]," said Nina.

For these former students, the stress of schooling became more difficult when they perceived that they experienced stereotyping.

The essential structure of the study was discussed in this section. The essence of the phenomenon experienced by the students indicated that resiliency sustained those students who graduated and those who earned a General Educational Development certificate after dropping out of alternative high school. Those students displayed persistence throughout their educational careers. They students found support at the alternative high school in relationships and small group instruction, however they pushed themselves forward.

Research Question 4

The fourth research question focused on how the teachers and administrators perceived that they supported the alternative high school students' growth toward autonomy, competence, and relatedness. The teachers and administrators described how their role as educators was to support students' success by dismantling systemic obstacles within the educational sphere and helping students find social networks to support their needs outside of school. Amanda shared how the alternative high school worked to build success. She said that at the interviews the school staff assess whether the fit between advisor and student is appropriate. Students' credits are reviewed to determine where additional credits might be awarded.

Steve described setting real-work expectations by explaining that every day students miss school they become less and less involved in that class and before long they become a failure. He shared that he tells students, "It's the same when you get older when you're going to work, it's the same theory, if you don't go to work you're not gonna [sic] get paid."

The teachers and administrators described that even when they had a room full of students, providing one-on-one instruction to students supported student learning. The teachers spoke about how fulfilling it was to see students succeed after they had faced so much adversity at their previous traditional high schools. Judy shared her beliefs about the benefits of peer tutoring working in groups for students. She stated, "It helps them, it shows them some success. I mean you would be amazed, if their former schools could see them in that kind of role, it's amazing, it's just amazing."

Amanda reflected on smaller groups sizes. She shared that the small setting allows students to get the academic help they need. At the larger school she attended Amanda said she felt that students could perform poorly academically and not be noticed because of the school's size. She said that that was not possible to do at Passages.

Alternative high schools intentionally set out to build relationships with students, thereby creating an environment where students can reengage in their education (Archambault et al., 2009; Balfanz et al., 2015; Karcher, 2008; Rhodes, 2008; Rodriguez-Planas, 2012). The teachers and administrators shared that they based relationships on students' educational needs and allowed dialogues to develop naturally. According to Judy, the alternative school was "a perfect place for building relationships," especially with advisees. Judy shared, "I get to know my students....All we do here is cheer them on, clap and encourage them, teach them without putting up with any discipline issues. They don't look at us as blocking....we're not out to get them." Steve shared, "I build relationships by first...talking with them, getting to know them. I don't do that as an authoritarian."

Both 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. Amanda explained how she set expectations and worked with her advisees. She said that on the first day students are given a cap and gown to wear for a photograph. Passages staff discuss graduation as an expectation for every student. Staff members worked to determine exactly what students needed to do to graduate and told the students, "We take how much you have and divide it by your rate. It's like you're in a

car, you're gonna get there it's just how fast are you gonna go." Amanda said she has students look at a calendar and she tells them their expected graduation date. According to Amanda, Patti assigned advisees to her who did "not need to have a thumb on top of them." Amanda shared, "for some students we are their only family, and they just need someone to talk to."

Donna discussed how she set expectations for advisory relationships. She described how advisors participate in goal checking to verify that students' progress at a satisfactory pace. Donna also said that she worked with students who were mothers of children. She shared, "Many times we talk about what changes are going to take place when they become a mom. If they have support at home they will most likely graduate. If they don't, they won't."

Judy described differences in advising programs between the traditional and alternative high schools. She said that at the traditional school, teachers are assigned students by alphabetized lists of names. Judy indicated that she was assigned a group of 20 students and expected to work with them. Judy shared, "There wasn't any direction or support....it was poorly planned and even more poorly executed." Judy shared how advisor/student relationships differed at the alternative school. She said that at the Passages interview, Patti makes advisor placement decisions after she determines how much and what kind of support each student needs. "Even more importantly, she is willing to switch the student to a different teacher if either the teacher or the student feel that there is a better match out there," said Judy. She shared that she gets to know the students but sometimes has to "chase them down." According to Judy, "sometimes we

have to put them on a schedule but generally we're seen as the cheerleader....we...clap and encourage and teach, and we don't have to put up with any discipline issues.”

Steve shared how the role of advisor is built into the alternative high school. According to Steve, the role of the advisor is to work one-on-one with each student throughout his or her time at Passages and share the burdens that arise with coursework and everyday life. Patti explained her role as the campus director who matched the advisors and advisees. She said the staff assigned each student to an advisor “with the intent to build a strong relationship.” Patti said,

Because we're so small, our individual characteristics are best used with students that can benefit from those characteristics....it's a matter of trying to match what you think after visiting with a student what you think they will need, however, we also have immediate turnaround if it becomes a mismatch. And teachers often come to me and say I really have visited with a student and feel like that it's a very good connection they think I understand what they're going through. So we may switch advisors at that point so that teachers and students can benefit from a strong relationship about goal setting, career path choice, all of those things that a mentor or counselor would do. With our students, we fill many roles.

Summary

Students across the U.S. are graduating at higher rates, yet many high school students continue to drop out of school and there is a growing graduation gap between student groups (Balfanz et al., 2015; Bowers et al., 2013; Boylan & Renzulli, 2014). The former students reported that push-out and pull-out factors were causes of their

disengagement from high school (Benner & Graham, 2009; Bowers et al., 2013; Lessard et al., 2008). Strategies implemented at alternative high schools can help some students to graduate in the prescribed four years (Aron, 2006; Dupper, 2006; Kim, 2011; Lagana-Riordan et al., 2011; Lange & Sletten, 2002; Slaten et al., 2015). This study included an exploration of deciding factors for school disengagement and reengagement, via self-determination theory, by examining the voices of former students who either graduated from or dropped out of an alternative high school (Deci & Ryan, 1985; Deci & Ryan, 2000; Niemiec & Ryan, 2009; Ryan & Deci, 2000). Former students' perceptions were examined of how the alternative high school affected their autonomy, competence, and relatedness in relation to their education and future (Deci & Ryan, 1985; Deci & Ryan, 2000; Niemiec & Ryan, 2009; Ryan & Deci, 2000). The essence of the phenomenon experienced by the former student participants indicated that they were resolved to move forward. Chapter 5 includes a presentation of the summary of the study; implications for research, practice, and theory; and recommendations for further research.

Chapter 5

Conclusions and Summary of the Study

In 2013, the overall U.S. high school graduation rate was a record high at 81.4% (Balfanz, Bridgeland, Bruce, & Fox, 2015; Bowers, Sprott, & Taff, 2013; Boylan & Renzulli, 2014). However, the graduation rates for some student groups decreased (Balfanz et al., 2015; Reid, 2012; Samel, Sondergeld, Fischer, & Patterson, 2011; Stearns & Glennie, 2006). Students who have dropped out of high school often experience both push-out and pull-out factors that contribute to their decision to leave school (Balfanz, Bridgeland, Bruce, & Fox, 2013; Benner & Wang, 2014; Gottfried, 2009; Losen, Orfield, & Balfanz, 2006; Reid, 2012; Sheldon, 2007). Alternative high schools help at-risk students to graduate by utilizing flexible scheduling and small group instruction, but not all students who attend alternative high schools graduate (Aron, 2006; Dupper, 2008; Kellmayer, 1995; Lange & Sletten 2002; Sable & Hoffman 2002).

Although there has been extensive research conducted in the area of the process of student disengagement behavior (Benner & Graham, 2009; Bowers et al., 2013; Lessard, Butler-Kisber, Fortin, Marcotte, Potvin, & Royer, 2008), there is a gap in the research pertaining to why students become disengaged in the first place. This study was conducted to contribute to the research on why students become disengaged from traditional high schools and to examine former students' perceptions of the effects alternative high schools have on their decision to either graduate or drop out.

This study explored deciding factors for school disengagement and reengagement by examining the voices of students who either graduated from or dropped out of an alternative high school and discover the essence of the participants' experiences. The

perceptions of former students' perceptions were examined in relation to how the alternative high school affected their autonomy, competence, and relatedness (Deci & Ryan, 1985; Deci & Ryan, 2000; Niemiec & Ryan, 2009; Ryan & Deci, 2000). Themes developed from the data; the participants' experiences showed their resiliency.

Summary of the Study

Former students' perceptions in relation to the impact of the alternative high school they attended were examined through the lens of self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 1985; Deci & Ryan, 2000; Niemiec & Ryan, 2009; Ryan & Deci, 2000). Self-determination theory posits that human beings are predisposed fundamentally to be curious of their surroundings, learning, and knowledge (Deci & Ryan, 1985; Deci & Ryan, 2003; Niemiec & Ryan, 2009; Ryan & Deci, 2000; Washington, Hughes, and Cosgriff, 2012).

The literature indicates that factors for disengagement include but are not excluded to; high absenteeism, retention due to mandated test failures, and loss of credits due to placement at the disciplinary campus (Archambault, Janosz, Fallu, & Pagani, 2009; Balfanz et al., 2015; Boylan & Renzulli, 2014; Bradley & Renzulli, 2011; Swanson, 2009). To examine the differences in experiences between students who graduated and those who dropped out, interviews were conducted with five former students who graduated and five former students who dropped out of an alternative high school. Three teachers and two administrators also were interviewed.

Systemic and campus culture factors can lead to push-out and pull-out factors which can cause students to disengage and drop out (Kane, 2006; Slee, 1986; Suh, Suh,

& Houston, 2007; Zhang, Willson, Katsiyannis, Barrett, Ju, & Wu, 2010). Push-out factors include school zero tolerance policies for high absenteeism and classroom disruptions leading to the loss of classroom instruction (Kane, 2006; Slee, 1986; Suh, Suh, & Houston, 2007; Zhang et al., 2010). Pull-out factors include students' need to work to help support the family, parenthood, and homelessness (Bradley & Renzulli, 2011; Christle, Jolivet, & Nelson, 2007; Darensbourg, Perez, & Blake, 2010; Greene & Winters, 2006; Heitzeg, 2009). On average, students who drop out of high school earn less than 50% of the annual salary of their high school graduate peers (Babcock & Bedard, 2011; Disla, 2004; Stanard, 2003). Researchers have shown that 52% of welfare recipients, 82% of the prison population, and 85% of juvenile justice cases are comprised of high school dropouts (Babcock & Bedard, 2011; Stanard, 2003). Other negative impacts of dropping out include: (1) forgone national income, (2) forgone taxable revenues for support of government services, (3) increased demand for social services, (4) increased crime and antisocial behaviors, (5) reduced political participation (6) reduced intergenerational mobility, and (7) a poorer level of health (Hayes, Nelson, Tabin, Pearson, & Worthy, 2002; Heckman, Humphries, Veramendi, & Urzua, 2014; Levin & Rouse, 2012; Moretti, 2007; Muenning, 2007; Rouse, 2007; Waldfogel, Garfinkel, & Kelly, 2007).

Some schools and school districts have invested in early warning systems to monitor student disengagement behaviors such as (1) chronic absenteeism, (2) repeated disciplinary infractions, (3) mandated test failure, and (4) course failure (Balfanz et al., 2015; Sparks, 2013). Alternative high schools can be a creative fix to help support over-

aged and under-credited students as they earn a high school diploma or complete a General Educational Development (GED) certificate (Aron, 2006; Dupper, 2008; Slaten, Irby, Tate, & Rivera, 2015).

This study was conducted to help fill the gap and provide insight into why students became disengaged from traditional high school by examining their perceptions of the effects an alternative high school had on decisions they made either to graduate or drop out. There is a large body of research on student behaviors from researchers who explored the process of student disengagement from school (Benner & Graham, 2009; Bowers et al., 2013; Lessard et al., 2008), yet there is a lack of understanding pertaining to why students become disengaged from high school in the first place.

Phenomenology involves depicting what participants have in common as they experience a phenomenon and investigating the personal experiences of the participants. Phenomenology is concerned with individuals' perceptions of an event (Smith, 2007; Zahavi, 2003). A phenomenological study focuses on smaller numbers of individual to obtain rich, in-depth data (Creswell, 2007; Dukes, 1984). The literature guides the researcher to find new areas of study (Creswell, 2007). The researcher develops an interview protocol to safeguard participants' confidentiality and the integrity of the study (Creswell, 2007; Jacob & Furgerson, 2012). Prior to the interviews, the interview questions for this study were developed, aligned with self-determination theory, and reviewed by experts in the area of student engagement (Creswell, 2007; Moustakas, 1994).

Face-to-face interviews were conducted with the participants in this study. Each face-to-face interview was audio-recorded, transcribed, and reviewed for accuracy (Creswell, 2007; Moustakas, 1994). After multiple readings of the transcripts, similar significant phrases and sentences from each transcript were color-coded. The researcher combined similar phrases and statements, and then combined them into clusters to reveal the essence of the experiences of the participants (Creswell, 2007; Moustakas, 1994; Zahavi, 2003). Peer experts from the field of student engagement reviewed the data throughout the process to help to eliminate bias and ensure clarity (Creswell, 2007; Marshall & Rossman, 1999; Miles & Huberman, 1994).

Dropouts from the alternative high school were, Albert, Suzanne, Trey, Nina, and Brandon. Graduates from the alternative high school were Khalid, Rick, Jim, Tara, and Cynthia. Patti was the alternative campus director and Steve was the campus counselor. Both participated in the study.

Summary of the Findings

The former students perceived that the success of the alternative high school they attended stemmed from the relationships that were formed between students and staff and among the students. The former students blamed push-out factors at the traditional high school for their disengagement and perceived that they exercised autonomy in their choice of whether pull-out factors would impact their decision to graduate or drop out. Personalized instruction supported student learning and peer-to-peer learning facilitated an environment for learning. The teachers and administrators described advocating for student success at the alternative high school by assisting students to find the appropriate

social network support systems the students needed outside the school setting and helping students to manage systemic obstacles within the educational sphere to support their educational growth. The findings will be discussed by research question and by theme.

Research Question 1

The first research question focused on how the former students perceived that their attendance at the alternative high school affected their autonomy. The former students made choices that impacted their educational experiences. The former students blamed push-out factors at the traditional high school for their disengagement. They lacked a sense of belonging at the traditional high school. The former students exercised autonomy in their choices of whether pull-out factors would impact their decision to graduate or drop out and took on adult roles that impacted their education.

Push-out factors are systemic practices that can cause students to lag behind their grade level peers. Examples include repeated placements in disciplinary, and special education programs (Archambault et al., 2009; Balfanz et al., 2015; Boylan & Renzulli, 2014; Bradley & Renzulli, 2011; De Witte & Csillag, 2014; Darensbourg et al., 2010; Heitzeg, 2009; McNeal, 1997). Three of the study participants, who graduated from the alternative high school, Khalid, Rick, and Jim, were assigned repeatedly to in-school suspension (ISS) and to the disciplinary campus while attending the traditional high school. All three were sent to truancy court. Khalid and Jim were not retained, but Rick was. Three of the study participants, who dropped out, Albert, Brandon, and Nina, also were assigned repeatedly to ISS and the disciplinary campus while attending the

traditional high school and truancy court. Albert was not retained, but Brandon and Nina were.

Khalid, Rick, Jim, Tara, Cynthia, Albert, Suzanne, and Nina lacked a sense of belonging at the traditional high school. The graduates and dropouts shared instances in which they perceived that the office staff, teachers, and campus administrators from the traditional high school campus they attended did not take advantage of opportunities to create a culture of inclusion. Khalid, Rick, Jim Cynthia, Albert, and Nina cited numerous occasions in which the student and/or his or her family were considered to be at fault for misunderstandings that may have occurred between themselves and the campus staff. When educators tell students and their families that they are the cause of the students' difficulties, all involved parties can become more entrenched in stereotyping and the opportunity to learn from each other can diminish (Perry & Calhoun-Butts, 2012; Robinson, 2012; South, Haynie, & Bose, 2007; Steele & Aronson, 1995; Taylor, Kochhar, Livingston, Lopez, and Morin, 2009; Teske, 2011; Thornton & Sanchez, 2010).

The former students exercised autonomy in their choices of whether pull-out factors would impact their decision to graduate or drop out. Pull-out factors are defined as circumstances that cause students to choose work over their education (Boylan & Renzulli, 2014; Bradley & Renzulli, 2011; McNeal, 1997). Graduates Khalid and Cynthia shared how they frequently had to work during their high school years to help support their families. Dropouts Albert and Nina also spoke about working and shared that they had the added responsibility of parenting during high school. Four of the 10 former

student participants in this study became parents during high school. All four of those individuals dropped out of school.

Research Question 2

The second research question focused on how the former students perceived that their attendance at the alternative high school affected their competence in having achieving success at a challenging tasks and being able to obtain a desired outcome. They perceived that personalized instruction supported their learning. When students are at least a year behind in credits, the need for a personalized instructional program increases substantially (Aron, 2006; Cohen & Smerdon, 2009; Dupper, 2006; Franklin, Streeter, Kim, & Tripodi, 2007; Kim, 2011; Knesting, 2008; Lagana-Riordan, Aguilar, Franklin, Streeter, Kim, Tripodi, & Hopson, 2011; Slaten et al., 2015; Tyler & Lofstrom, 2009). Less student disengagement occurs when class sizes are smaller and curricula are applicable to students' current life situations (Almeida, Steinberg, Santos, & Le, 2010; Balfanz et al., 2015; Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Bloom & Unterman, 2014; Freeman, Simonsen, McCoach, Sugai, Lombardi, & Homer, 2015; Iachini, Buettner, Anderson-Butcher, & Reno, 2013; Perry, Liu, & Pabian, 2010).

In order to be considered a candidate for Passages, students had to: (1) be a year or more deficient in credits, (2) be pregnant or parenting, (3) be coded at-risk according to state criteria, and/or (4) have economic factors such as needing to work more than 15 hours a week. Passages allowed students to enter the program wherever they were academically and receive instructed at that point. The former students described this particular practice of the alternative high school as very helpful to them. Alternative high

schools do a good job of being flexible to meet students where they are due to their size (Franklin, Streeter, Kim, & Tripodi, 2007; Hemmer, Madsen, & Torres, 2013; Kim, 2013; Lagana-Riordan et al., 2011; Lehr, Tan, & Ysseldyke, 2009; Slaten et al., 2015; Streeter, Franklin, Kim, & Tripodi, 2010; Tyler & Lofstrom, 2009).

Graduates, Khalid, Rick, Jim Tara, and Cynthia and dropouts Trey and Brandon described how working in teams on a large project bolstered their learning and gave them a better understanding of what their teammates were doing to contribute to the project. Students who were employed described how group work at school mirrored actual teamwork on the job and reinforced the importance of being able to work with peers and the role of personal responsibilities (Almeida et al., 2010; Balfanz et al., 2015; Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Bloom & Unterman, 2014; Freeman et al., 2015; Iachini et al., 2013; Perry et al., 2010).

The former students perceived that one-on-one advising at the alternative high school supported their curricular and life decisions. The alternative high school staff intentionally matched advisors and advisees. Most of the former student participants experienced the teacher-student relationship very differently from other relationships in their educational past. The former student participants reported that they these one-on-one relationships about school and life issues bolstered their decision-making skills. It is important that school staff did not shy away from outside of school topics (Karcher, 2008; Rhodes, 2008; Rodriguez-Planas, 2012).

During the initial interview, the former students were asked specific questions so that the campus director could match purposefully students with advisors. However, if the

student or teacher determined that a different advisor would better serve the student, the teacher or the student could request a change. All of the participants spoke about the importance of being an equal partner in this process. The more students are engaged with choosing what works best to meet their educational needs, the better chance they will stay engaged in their education (Archambault et al., 2009; Balfanz et al., 2015; Bridgeland, DiIulio, & Morison, 2006; Gonzales et al., 2014; Henry et al., 2012; Iachini et al., 2013; Janosz, Archambault, Morizot, & Pagani, 2008).

Research Question 3

The third research question focused on how the former students perceived that their attendance at the alternative high school affected their relatedness in establishing a sense of mutual respect and reliance with others (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; deCharms, 1968; Deci, 1975; Deci & Ryan, 1985; Harlow, 1958; Skinner, 1995; White, 1959). Overall, the former students perceived that relationships rather than programs led to the success of the alternative high school. Substantial differences existed in the interactions between students and staff members at the traditional campus compared to those that occurred than at the alternative campus. The former students perceived that stereotyping occurred at the traditional high school. The graduates, Khalid, Rick, Jim, Tara, Cynthia, and Albert, a dropout, attributed the success of the alternative high school to the staff; they could not recall a program or process employed at the campus, but perceived their relationships with staff members to be based on mutual respect.

The former student participants described situations in which similar issues arose at the traditional and alternative high schools with very different outcomes. The former

students perceived that their traditional high school campus staff sometimes did not recognize issues that the former students believed were important, and that when they did, the problem was blamed on the student or his or her parent. At the alternative high school, the former students perceived an emphasis of taking personal responsibility for their own actions, systematic failures, and progression toward academic completion.

Khalid, Tara, Cynthia, Albert, and Nina felt that a contributing factor to their disengagement were occasions at the traditional high school when negative characterizations were used by office staff, teachers, counselors, and campus administrators to describe the students by ethnicity, gender, and socioeconomic status rather than by name. Addressing stereotypes can be very difficult for students (Perry & Calhoun-Butts, 2012; Robinson, 2012; South et al., 2007; Steele & Aronson, 1995; Taylor et al., 2009; Teske, 2011; Thornton & Sanchez, 2010).

Research Question 4

The fourth research question focused on how the teachers and administrators perceived that they supported the alternative high school students' growth toward autonomy, competence, and relatedness. 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. Judy spoke about creating interdisciplinary projects for student group work. She said that the Passages staff had "developed large-scale projects that encompass the core subject areas to build learning across each discipline and to help kids see the relevance of subject matter in real life

work.” Judy said that doing so “fosters team building, mutual respect...they really learn from it.”

Although the teachers and administrators shared that they created a path for the former students to complete the necessary coursework required to graduate high school, the staff members said that they understood that the students were ultimately responsible for following through by attending and completing the work. The staff acted as a support network and a cheering section for the students and taught them how to confront obstacles in their path toward graduation.

Donna explained that students are encouraged to utilize the food pantry and district health clinic. According to Donna, at the traditional high schools there was a stigma associated with the students who utilized the district’s social services, but not at Passages. Donna said that at Passages the pantry and clothes closets are part of the school tour. Students are encouraged to visit the closets and the free student clinic. “We openly discuss the needs our students have outside of school that can pull on them and do our best to help them address those issues, however we can’t fix everything,” she said. Patti discussed her reaction to students leaving school. She shared, “We’ve had kids walk out of here that we could not stop...or we’ve lost them over the summer where we could not find them...moving or disconnecting or having no way to connect with them...those are huge failures.”

The alternative school campus focused on the required credits the students needed to complete high school. Due to the small group settings, the staff said that they were able to address the credits needed, rather than teaching an assigned schedule for a larger

group. They shared that students' learning gaps were filled. The built-in flexible scheduling of alternative high schools for those students who need additional one-on-one instruction and those who need less one-on-one instruction allow school staff to differentiate instruction and address a greater number of student needs at one time (Aron, 2006; Dupper, 2006; Kim, 2011; Lagana-Riordan et al., 2011; Lange & Sletten, 2002; Slaten et al., 2015).

Patti shared the staff's belief on personalized instruction and stated that school staff "focuses on the needs of each student from the day they walk in to the day they walk out." Patti said Passages was so small that no student was able to *fall through the cracks*. She stated that did not mean to be insensitive to the traditional schools. "I just mean that there is just somebody following every student here...are they alright, what do they need, how can we be better, how well are they doing. It's just who we are; nobody gets to hide in the corners," stated Patti.

The teachers and administrators described how they built relationships in an effort to build capacity for student success. Patti explained, "Our great successes are to get those students to come here and have them feel comfortable enough to become successful in a new setting and by that definition you're thrilled to see them feel safe, comfortable, and make progress." Donna described how she interacted with students: "I just try to talk to them respectfully...they know they have an advisor, they know...someone's checking up on them, and that that's what really helps. ...we make progress and we chart and everything is very concrete." Amanda described her experiences with building relationships with students:

We get to know the students...it's so small...it really is a family. But for some of these kids, we are their only family, and it's great to be that to somebody if I can. Basically, when a student gets here I do their [sic] orientation and I tell them I don't care what their attendance was before but that's not what it's gonna [sic] be now.

Summary of Themes and Sub-Themes

Five overarching themes and six supporting subthemes provided the essence of the phenomenon experienced by the student participants. The first theme was relationships rather than programs led to the success of this alternative high school. The two supporting subthemes for this theme were substantial differences existed in the interaction between students and staff members at the traditional campus rather than at the alternative campus and students believed stereotyping occurred at the traditional high school. The second theme was students blamed push-out factors at the traditional high school for their disengagement. One subtheme emerged to support this theme, students lacked a sense of belonging at the traditional high school. The third theme was students exercised autonomy in their choices of whether pull-out factors would impact their decision to graduate or drop out. One subtheme emerged to support this theme, students took on adult roles which had an impact on their education. The fourth theme was personalized instruction supported student learning. One subtheme emerged to support this theme, peer-to-peer instruction nurtured a learning environment through group projects. The fifth theme to emerge from the data was one-on-one advising supported

students' curricular and life decisions. One subtheme emerged to support this theme, the match between advisor and advisee was intentional.

Theme 1: Relationships rather than programs

Regardless of whether the former student participants graduated or dropped out, they attributed the strength of the alternative high school to the relationships they built with staff members and fellow students. Khalid, Rick, Jim, Tara, Cynthia, and Albert described an atmosphere that encouraged personal growth, mutual respect, understanding, and learning. They detailed how these relationships were valued and shared their perception of the importance of relationship building with fellow students during group projects that required team building. Patti, the campus director, explained how the students who attended were accepted because they either had something in their academic history or in their personal life that necessitated a change.

The former students described similar incidents that occurred at both the traditional and alternative high schools that resulted in very different responses from staff members. Khalid, Rick, Jim, Tara, Cynthia, and Albert shared that at their traditional high school they did not feel encouraged to be a partner in finding a solution to resolve issues like they were at the alternative high school.

Expectations of student involvement and personal responsibility for learning were set at the interview for the alternative high school. Students respond best when they are held to a high standard and are encouraged to help plan for their own learning (Almeida et al., 2010; Balfanz et al., 2015; Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Bloom & Unterman, 2014;

Freeman et al., 2015; Iachini et al., 2013; Mello, Mallett, Andretta, & Worrell, 2012; Payne, 2009; Perry et al., 2010; Robinson, 2012).

Khalid, Tara, Cynthia, Albert, and Nina felt that a contributing factor to their disconnect with the traditional high school was occasions when campus staff used negative characterizations to describe the student by ethnicity, gender identification and socioeconomic status rather than using his or her name. Students can find addressing stereotypes especially challenging when the wrongdoer is in a position of power (Kellow & Jones, 2008; Legewie & DiPrete, 2012; McKown & Strambler, 2009; Mello et al., 2012; Perry & Calhoun-Butts, 2012; Robinson, 2012; Teske, 2011; Thornton & Sanchez, 2010; Weiler, 2012).

Theme 2: Push-out factors were a cause for disengagement

All of the former students blamed push-out factors that caused them to feel dismissed and rejected from the traditional high school as a reason for their disengagement. They described campus zero-tolerance policies that required students to be assigned to in-school suspension (ISS) after a high rate of absences as not helping them to address the underlying issues that caused their attendance issues. The former students perceived that there was a campus culture of pushing students out of school exhibited by a lack of processes for the students to recapture lost learning while in ISS or at the disciplinary campus.

Khalid, Rick, Jim, Tara, Albert, and Nina, described experiencing frustrating conversations with staff at the traditional high school when trying to address issues causing disengagement. They said that they were told that nothing could be done because

either they had not followed directions or they had waited too long to ask for help. The former students stated that in most cases the interactions were trivial, however, over time, these seemingly insignificant occasions contributed to their decision to leave school altogether (Archambault et al., 2009; Balfanz et al., 2015; Boylan & Renzulli, 2014).

Theme 3: Students exercised autonomy in decision making

The former students reported that they realized at some point whether or not they would graduate from high school. Cynthia stated how grateful she was for the support she received from the alternative school campus, but said that she knew when she was accepted at the school that she would graduate. The other graduates made similar remarks about being resolute in their decision to graduate. Three of the four former students who had become parents during high school spoke about the overwhelming responsibilities of being a young parent. All four parents ultimately decided to leave school. Trey and Brandon spoke about giving up and how the alternative campus did not give them what they needed.

All 10 of the former students took on adult roles. Siblings Cynthia and Albert worked 40-hour weeks to help contribute to the family's financial stability. Cynthia did not want her mom to have to work and worried about her father's addiction. Albert became a father and was kicked out of the family home. To him there was no other option but to leave school and work two full-time jobs. Khalid perceived that his language and culture barriers put him at a disadvantage.

Siblings Rick and Jim experienced the effects of their parents' divorce combined with drug use. Suzanne and Nina became parents while in high school and found that the

responsibilities of daily life took precedence over school. Trey and Brandon experienced situations that required specific knowledge of how credits work. They were unable to navigate the intricacies of the educational system and felt they never received the assistance they needed. Taking on learning adult roles during the high school years can cause students to drop out (Anderson, Leventhal, & Dupéré, 2014; Bloom & Unterman, 2014; Boylan & Renzulli, 2014; Doll, Eslami, & Walters, 2013; Fall & Roberts, 2012; Payne, 2008).

Theme 4: Personalized instruction supported student learning

The former students perceived that the alternative high school's practices of sustaining individualized and small group instruction led to their increased success. The former students discussed instructional methods that differed between the alternative high school and their traditional high school. They described individualized instruction at the alternative school as a time during which they could meet with teachers for support. The former students viewed their courses as being student-driven. Researchers have found that smaller classes and curricula applicable to youth issues can lead to increased student engagement (Almeida et al., 2010; Balfanz et al., 2015; Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Bloom & Unterman, 2014; Freeman et al., 2015; Iachini et al., 2013; Perry et al., 2010).

Rick, Jim, Tara, Cynthia, Albert, and Trey described how they gained ownership of their learning when they knew that their classmates were depending on them. The former students stated that they found a sense of pride in their work and had an increased respect for teachers. Those former students who were employed during high school

shared the belief that they implemented what they learned in the classroom into their jobs by using strategies they had learned while working in groups at school.

Theme 5: One-on-one advising

According to the former students, advisor-student relationships provided a forum in which they could discuss life issues such as parenthood, work, and educational and career goals. Khalid, Rick, Jim, Tara, Cynthia, and Albert described this relationship as more than the traditional student-teacher connection. They spoke about their advisors with fondness and gratitude for the support and time they spent working together. Mentoring can lead to a greater connectedness with peers from other cultures, self-esteem, and support from friends (Karcher, 2008; Rhodes, 2008; Rodriguez-Planas, 2012).

The former students shared that they were told during their application interview about the advisor-advisee relationship. Within weeks of enrolling they understood that their opinion on the advisor with whom they were matched mattered. Students who have disengaged with school need to find their voices and learn to test relationships in a safe environment such as school (Almeida et al., 2010; Balfanz et al., 2015; Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Bloom & Unterman, 2014; Freeman et al., 2015; Iachini et al., 2013; Perry et al., 2010).

Conclusions

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to explore deciding factors for school disengagement and reengagement using the lens of self-determination theory. Resiliency emerged as the overall essence of the phenomenon experienced by the

participants. The tenacity of the former students who graduated (Khalid, Rick, Jim, Tara, and Cynthia) and those who earned a General Educational Development (GED) certificate after dropping out of the alternative high school (Albert, Suzanne, and Nina) appeared to drive them to pursue their educational goal. The former students found support at the alternative high school through relationships they built with staff members and fellow students; however, it was their persistence that moved them forward.

Researchers of school disengagement have explored the degrees to which students are vested in their education (Balfanz et al., 2015; Christle et al., 2007; Cooper, 2013; Fries, Carney, Blackman-Urteaga, & Savas, 2012; Pharris-Ciurej et al., 2012). Students' feelings of connection to their school can stem from building relationships with caring adult who can offer students support (Almeida et al., 2010; Balfanz et al., 2015; Bloom & Unterman, 2014; Boylan & Renzulli, 2014; Freeman et al., 2015; Iachini et al., 2013).

This study confirmed the research of Balfanz et al. (2015) who found that relationships build students' capacity for growth. It was found in this study that relationships that build capacity for students to grow can be between students as well as between teachers and students. Negative adult feedback can stimulate positive growth. However, when students exercised autonomy in deciding it was time to graduate, the relationships they had formed supported their decision; relationships were the secondary rather than the determining factor.

Push-out and pull-out factors played a major role in the disengagement of the former student participants in this study. Khalid, Rick Jim, Albert, Nina, and Brandon blamed the traditional high schools for systemic push-out factors such as zero tolerance

policies that caused students to be assigned to in-school suspension (ISS) and campus culture push-out factors such as being assigned to ISS without strategic plans for students to recapture lost learning leading to further loss of course credits.

The findings from this study mirror the findings from previous studies that indicated the need for changes in zero tolerance policies and improved staff development to support educator and student understanding of processes that can stifle student growth (Balfanz & Fox, 2015; Heitzeg, 2009; Klima, Miller, & Nunlist, 2009; Maynard, McCrea, Pigott, & Kelly, 2013; Reid, 2012; Rodriguez & Conchas, 2009; Skiba, Reynolds, Graham, Sheras, Conoley, & Garcia-Vazquez, 2006; Teske, 2011).

Tara, Cynthia, Albert, Suzanne, and Nina shared that they exercised autonomy as they determined whether or not pull-out factors would impact their decision to graduate or drop out. Much like previous studies, this study found that students face outside issues such as having to work long hours to contribute to the financial stability of the family, parenthood, or homelessness which can pull them out of school (Boylan & Renzulli, 2014; Bradley & Renzulli, 2011; McNeal, 1997). Albert, Suzanne, Nina, and Brandon became parents while in high school and dropped out of the alternative campus, however, after they left, Suzanne and Nina obtained a General Education Development (GED) certificate. Near the time of this study, Albert and Brandon were in the process of obtaining a GED. The findings from the study showed that push-out and pull-out factors led to the former students' disengagement from the traditional high school. However, Nina, who was undocumented, reported to the traditional high school that she was

withdrawing from school to return to her country of origin when she did not plan to leave the U.S.

Participants found support for their learning and life decision making at the alternative high school via personalized instruction and one-on-one advising. Researchers have indicated that students are more engaged with school when classroom sizes are small and the curricula can be applied to their current life circumstances (Almeida et al., 2010; Balfanz et al., 2015; Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Bloom & Unterman, 2014; Freeman et al., 2015; Iachini et al., 2013; Perry et al., 2010). Khalid, Rick, Jim, Tara, Cynthia, Albert, Trey, and Brandon shared that they had a greater understanding of content when they worked in groups on projects that encompassed multiple subject matters and when each member of the group was responsible for teaching his or her area of content to other group members. This fostered ownership of participants' learning as well as team building.

One-on-one advising at the alternative campus was a unique experience for the former students. The alternative campus staff intentionally worked to develop relationships to nurture students during their time at the campus. Building intentional relationships can support students (Karcher, 2008; Rhodes, 2008; Rodriguez-Planas, 2012). The findings of this study concur with previous researchers of student engagement who found that students are more engaged in school and with the curricula when classes are small and the curricula are applicable to youth issues (Almeida et al., 2010; Balfanz et al., 2015; Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Bloom & Unterman, 2014; Freeman et al., 2015; Iachini et al., 2013; Perry et al., 2010).

Former alternative high school students were the main focus of this study. The students were older when the advisor-advisee relationship was formed. Since relationship building took place at an alternative high school, the students already were at-risk for dropping out of school. Previous researchers (Dupper, 2006; Fortin, Marcotte, Potvin, Royer, & Joly, 2006; Franklin et al., 2007; Hemmer et al., 2013; Kellmayer, 1995; Lagana-Riordan et al., 2011; Lange & Sletten, 2002; Streeter et al., 2011; Suh et al., 2007) have not indicated whether students studied were labeled at-risk and, if they were at-risk, what indicators caused them to be assigned the label.

Implications

Findings from this study provided valuable information on how students perceive that their environment contributes to their learning. Implications from this study will offer insights for practice and policy to support student growth in smaller learning environments, resiliency, and in reevaluating zero tolerance policies. Smaller learning environments can keep students engaged in school and with the curricula. Independent of the student population, the campus should be designed as a space for students to work with peers and participate in small-group instruction, which can lead to higher student achievement and increased graduation rates (Aron, 2006; Booyesen & Grosser, 2014; Dupper, 2006; Kim, 2011; Lagana-Riordan et al., 2011; Lange & Sletten, 2002; Slaten et al., 2015). Schools should invest in the creation of smaller classes and establish curricula geared to encompassing project-based learning that focuses on issues that ignite students' interests (Aron, 2006; Booyesen & Grosser, 2014; Dupper, 2006; Kim, 2011; Lagana-Riordan et al., 2011; Lange & Sletten, 2002; Slaten et al., 2015).

Resiliency led nine of the 10 high school students in this study to complete requirements toward a high school diploma or GED. A better understanding is needed to determine how the alternative campus and school district could have supported the one student who did not obtain a high school diploma or a GED. Educators need to listen when students exhibit disengagement behaviors such as skipping school or disrupting class. These behaviors are warning signs that the student is about to leave school. School districts must develop early warning systems for every grade level and assist campuses in the implementation of these systems to monitor disengagement behaviors and have interventions in place to support students who are in need.

Zero tolerance policies remove students from classroom instruction and disrupt learning. Students must only be removed from direct instruction for extreme situations, and there must be an appropriate instructional recovery plan for every student who is removed from the classroom. Four of the 10 students who became parents in this study dropped out of high school. Focused programs are needed to support these students to earn a high school diploma and continue on to post-secondary work.

School districts set policies regarding release dates for students who are assigned to disciplinary campuses for disruptive behaviors. When those release dates go beyond the end of the calendar school year, the district has the ability to: (1) waive the remaining days so that the student may begin in the fall at their home campus, (2) carry the remaining days over to the next school year, (3) offer a disciplinary summer school program so that the student may complete the remaining days during the summer to begin in the fall with his or her classmates, or (4) combine some or all of these options. A

disciplinary summer school program could be created at which students are held responsible for their behaviors and afforded the opportunity to complete assignments and earn credits toward high school graduation.

This study provided information on how students perceive that their environment contributes to their learning. Growth can be supported through small learning environments, student resiliency, and the reevaluation of zero tolerance policies.

Recommendations for Further Research

Recommendations for further examination of student push-out and pull-out factors, the relationship between mentoring and student success, alternative high schools, and the gap in graduation rates between student groups and undocumented student dropouts will be discussed in this section. Students can disengage from school when they are assigned repeatedly to ISS, the disciplinary campus, and truancy court (Anderson, 2014; Archambault et al., 2009; Balfanz et al., 2015; Balfanz & Fox, 2015; Bowers & Sprott, 2012b; Bradley & Renzulli, 2011; Brown, 2007; Brownstein, 2010; Cavazos & Javier, 2010; Christle et al., 2007); however half of the former students in the current study graduated and half dropped out of the alternative high school, indicating a need for further research to explore the effects alternative high schools have on supporting student reengagement.

Students in this study took on adult roles, which impacted their education. Prior to entering the alternative high school, 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. The former students

perceived that the stressors contributed to their decision to drop out. Further research is needed to explore how students take on adult roles and what schools can do to better support them. Specifically, additional research is needed to explore how alternative high schools support student parents.

Although researchers have found that mentoring leads to a greater connectedness to culturally different peers for elementary boys and high school aged girls, further studies are needed to examine the relationship between mentoring and student academic outcomes (Karcher, 2008; Rhodes, 2008; Rodriguez-Planas, 2012). Further research also is needed to explore steps that can be taken to address the gap in graduation rates between student groups.

The undocumented former students who participated in this study told their school that they were withdrawing to return to their countries of origin when they did not plan to leave the U.S. Districts and states need to determine whether this is a local issue or if undocumented students across the nation are sacrificing their education in order to help support their families.

Summary

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to explore deciding factors for school disengagement and reengagement via self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 1985; Deci & Ryan, 2000; Niemiec & Ryan, 2009; Ryan & Deci, 2000). Participants' perceptions were examined to determine how an alternative high school impacted their autonomy, competence, and relatedness in relation to their education and future. Face-to-

face interviews were conducted with 10 student participants (five graduates and five dropouts), three teachers, and two administrators from an alternative high school.

Five overarching themes and six supporting subthemes emerged, providing the essence of the phenomenon experienced by the former student participants. The students in this study exhibited resiliency. Determination was exemplified by the former students who graduated and by those who dropped out and earned a GED.

The former students perceived that relationships between staff members and students led to the success of the alternative high school. 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. The former students perceived that one-on-one advising supported their learning and decision making outside of school.

Appendix A
Demographic Information Sheet

Appendix A

Demographic Information Sheet

Race:

- White
- Hispanic
- Black
- Asian
- Pacific Islander
- Mixed

Current age: _____

Age when you entered high school: _____

Age when you left high school: _____

Number of years in high school: 1-2 2-3 3-4 4+

Received special educational services: Yes No Not sure

English Language Learner/Limited English Proficient: Yes No Not sure

Passed the TAKS/STAAR test: Yes No

Passed End of Course (EOC) exams: Yes No Not sure

Retained in grades K-5: Yes No -in grades 6-8: Yes No -in grades 9-12 Yes

No

Approximate number of times suspended while in high school: ____

Were you absent a lot in any grade level: Yes No

Appendix B

Interview Protocol for Former Students

Appendix B

Interview Protocol for Former Students

Opening Script

My name is Marina Flores, and I am a graduate student at the University of Texas at Arlington. I am conducting research on students who became disengaged in school, attended an alternative high school, and either graduated or dropped out of the alternative high school. The purpose of this study is to explore the deciding factors for school disengagement through hearing the voices of those who have had the experience. After receiving permission from the school district, I was given your name and contact information. You are not required to participate in this study and can ask to stop at any time. I will give you a consent-to-participate form for you to sign, and I will keep it on file. Your name will be changed for this research for confidentiality purposes. I will be recording this interview, so that it may be transcribed and coded for analysis. I will share your transcript with you for you to review. Please do not hesitate to ask any questions either now, during the interview, or after we have completed the interview.

Interview Questions and Probes

Autonomy:

1. Please describe your overall school experience.
Probes: Tell me more about what made your school experience positive/negative.
Tell me about a time when you felt successful in school. Please explain.
Tell me about a time when you felt unsuccessful in school. Please explain.
2. Do you feel that you became disengaged from school?
Probes: If yes, why do you think you became disconnected from school? Please explain.
3. Did any interaction(s) between yourself and any school staff member contribute to your connection or disconnection to school? Please explain.
Probes: How did teachers reach out to you? How?
Did school administrators reach out to you? How?
Did other school staff members reach out to you? How?
To what extent do you remember any school staff member reaching out to you and your family to address any interaction that contributed to your connection or disconnection to school?
4. Please describe your attendance beginning in elementary school.
Probe: To what extent do you remember any school staff member reach out to you and your family to address any attendance issues?
5. Describe how your attendance progressed in middle school.
Probe: To what extent do you remember any school staff member reach out to you and your family to address any attendance issues?
6. Describe how your attendance progressed in high school.

Probe: To what extent do you remember any school staff member reach out to you and your family to address any attendance issues?

7. What or who influenced your decision to graduate from the alternative high school?
Probes: Tell me about any interaction you or your family received from the school or from staff members that informed your decision to graduate.
Tell me about the factors that led to your decision to graduate.
Tell me about the factors that led to your decision to drop out of school.
8. If you were going to repeat your school career would you do anything different?
Please explain.

Competence:

9. Do you feel that the special instruction you received at the alternative school assisted you?
Probes: Please explain. (Examples: small group instruction, one-on-one instruction, peer instruction)
10. What were your school hours like?
Probes: Did this assist you? Please describe.
11. Please describe your experiences with setting goals.
12. Please describe your experience with advisor mentoring.
13. What classes most helped you? How did they help you?
Probes: course credit for job/work, parenting classes
14. Describe how your decision to graduate/dropout has affected your life.

Relatedness:

15. Was there a financial necessity for you to work while you were in high school?
Probes: If yes, tell me more about why you needed to work.
Please tell me your work schedule (and number of hours worked in a week).
To what extent do you feel that work helped or put off your education?
16. Did you become a parent while you were in high school?
Probes: If yes, tell me how becoming a parent shaped your education?
17. Describe the factors that led to your decision to attend an alternative high school.
Probes: What is your general feeling about your experience at the alternative high school? Please explain.
Describe how your attendance progressed at the alternative high school?
18. Which, if any, of the programs at the alternative high school do you feel helped you?
Probes: Please explain.
Which, if any, of the programs at the alternative high school do you feel were ineffective? Please explain.

Closing Script

I want to thank you for the time you have taken to speak with me today. Again, I want to assure you that your name will be changed for this study and that you will have an opportunity to review the transcript of this interview.

Appendix C

Interview Protocol for Teachers and Administrators

Appendix C Interview Protocol for Teachers and Administrators

Opening Script

My name is Marina Flores, and I am a graduate student at the University of Texas at Arlington. I am conducting research on students who became disengaged in school, attended an alternative high school, and either graduated or dropped out of the alternative high school. The purpose of this study is to explore the deciding factors for school disengagement through hearing the voices of those who have had the experience. After receiving permission from the school district, I was given your name and contact information. You are not required to participate in this study and can ask to stop at any time. I will give you a consent-to-participate form for you to sign, and I will keep it on file. Your name will be changed for this research for confidentiality purposes. I will be recording this interview, so that it may be transcribed and coded for analysis. I will share your transcript with you for you to review. Please do not hesitate to ask any questions either now, during the interview, or after we have completed the interview.

Interview Questions and Probes

Autonomy:

1. Please describe how you build relationships with the student population you work with. (Probes: Tell me about a time when you felt successful with a student. Please explain.)
Tell me about a time when you felt unsuccessful. Please explain.
2. Please describe how or if you discuss past behaviors regarding attendance with a student. (Probe: Tell me more about why you would or would not discuss attendance with a student.)
3. Describe how you approach the subject of graduation with a student. Please explain. (Probe: To what extent do you feel you influence a student's decision to graduate?)

Competence:

4. Describe your role in goal setting. Please explain.
5. Describe your role in advisor mentoring. Please explain.

Relatedness:

6. Are there particular programs (pregnancy-related services, work study, smaller setting) offered at the alternative high school that you feel address the needs of this student population more effectively than a traditional high school? If so what are they? Please explain.

Closing Script

I want to thank you for the time you have taken to speak with me today. Again, I want to assure you that your name will be changed for this study and that you will have an opportunity to review the transcript of this interview.

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