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# Exploration of independent study programs in supporting re-engaged students to earn a high school diploma

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EXPLORATION OF INDEPENDENT STUDY PROGRAMS IN SUPPORTING

RE-ENGAGED STUDENTS TO EARN A HIGH SCHOOL DIPLOMA

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by

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DOCTOR OF EDUCATION

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VITA

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ABSTRACT

Although high school dropouts have been studied in-depth, there is a lack of information pertaining to individuals who dropout and re-enroll. In addition, there is no research on individuals that re-enroll through an independent study high school to attain a high school diploma. This study intended to answer 3 research questions: (a) what factors led high school dropouts to return to high school, (b) what factors led re-engaged youth to stay in school and graduate, and (c) what does an independent study provide re-engaged youths?

This qualitative study utilized the interpretative phenomenological research design. This study was conducted with the self-efficacy theoretical framework as the foundation in the data analysis to understand the participants' experiences, as previous research proposes that an individual's self-efficacy influences academic motivation and the willingness to overcome obstacles. This study collected data from 2 independent study charter high schools in Southern California. 14 participants participated in this study with 11 participants coming from 1 high school and 3 from the other. The primary sources of data for this study included a Generalized Self-Efficacy questionnaire and a semi-structured interview protocol.

Three significant findings emerged from the analysis of the participants' responses. First, understanding the value of a high school diploma motivated the participants to return to school and earn a high school diploma. Second, a strong and positive support system is essential in motivating and encouraging an individual to overcome challenges. Third, the school's environment, from the school's schedule to the school's atmosphere, the support a student receives, and school activities, are critical in in engaging students in their learning. The findings from this study can be utilized to when developing school policies or practices. Based on the results, students would benefit from educators that collaborate with the students in developing

plans with clear, achievable goals for high school graduation and beyond. Students would benefit from a mentoring program as positive relationships with at least one caring adult are crucial in providing students someone who can support them as they face challenges. Finally, a school environment that is welcoming, inclusive, and engaging for all its students matters.

**Chapter 1: Introduction**

The United States national high school graduation rate in 2016-2017 was 84.6% with the graduation rates of the individual states ranging between 72% and 94% (Kerr & Boyington, 2019). This means that, nationally, 15% of students fail to earn their high school diploma and are dropping out. The dropout rate across the United States, including that of California, has become too costly to ignore. As a result, there are alternative education models that recover and help these previous high school dropouts become high school graduates. Alternative education models are schools that provide a different approach to the traditional comprehensive schools. These schools engage in the belief that the traditional comprehensive school model fails to sufficiently address the needs of students in their own learning (Maillet, 2017). The alternative education models include, but are not limited to, online schools, homeschools, charter schools, continuation schools, magnet schools, and independent study schools (U.S. Department of Education, 2007). The purpose of this study was to investigate the reasons why students that dropped out of high school opted to return to school, through an independent study model, to complete their high school requirements and obtain a high school diploma.

**Background**

Education is important for the success of both society and the individual. In the United States, the high school graduation and dropout rates have long been used as a gauge of the education system's productivity and effectiveness, as well as, society's social and economic well-being (Hauser & Koenig, 2011). According to Stuit and Springer (2010), education is one of the most vital and important elements related to both social and economic achievements. For many jobs, one of the minimum requirements is a high school diploma; without one, career opportunities become limited, which then also limits earning potential (Sum et al., 2009). Kelly

(1993) explains that as high school graduation became the norm, society began to believe that the role of schooling was to prepare students for work. Employers utilize education attainment as a screener for jobs and without the right degree or diploma, the individual loses out on an opportunity (Dorn, 1993). As a result, those without a high school diploma are more likely to experience personal hardships (Levin & Rouse, 2012; Stuit & Springer, 2010).

Nationally, 1.3 million high school students yearly, 7,000 high school students daily, or one high school student every 26 seconds are dropping out and failing to earn their high school diploma (Miller, 2011). California's high school dropout rate is on par with the nation's average. In 2007, the dropout rate in California was 34%; since then it has continued to decrease with the dropout rate being 25.3% in 2010 and 17.7% in 2015 (Torlakson, 2016). However, when looking at the data, there is a noticeable discrepancy of those who are graduating and those who are dropping out; there is an obvious lack of equity among the different groups. Melville (2006) discovered that the students who were white or Asian were more likely to graduate, while African Americans and non-white Hispanics were more likely to drop out. In addition, students that with a higher socioeconomic status (SES) had a higher likelihood of graduating than those from a low SES (Melville, 2006).

Walker (1963) found that disparities among the various students existed as early as the 1960s. It was in 1963 that the term *achievement gap* was introduced to the nation (G. Walker, 1963). The achievement gap encompasses more than just standardized test scores; it also includes the graduation gap, the discipline gap, and the data gap among all students (Farrelly & Daniels, 2013; U.S. Department of Education, 2012). Further, the racial achievement gap became apparent throughout the nation with the passage of No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) in 2002 (Orfield, 2004). NCLB required that students be assessed annually across the nation to measure

student learning and achievement; however, what made these assessments more unique than the ones in the past was the fact that these assessments were released publicly and presented the test results sorted by race, English Language Learners (ELL), students with a disability, and socioeconomic status (Orfield, 2004). In addition, NCLB also required reports of graduation rates as a means to show student outcomes (both positive and negative; Orfield, 2004).

The purpose behind NCLB was to encourage students and schools to be successful with an emphasis on high school students earning a high school diploma. However, the federal government only required schools and districts to report annual test scores (Hauser & Koenig, 2011). Schools and districts were incentivized to produce high test scores annually; schools that produced better scores received more money than schools that performed poorly (Curley, 2016). As a result, this created a system in which schools and districts were less concerned with graduation rates than the state tests scores (Hauser & Koenig, 2011). Advocacy groups were concerned with this because states and districts were not required to report graduation rates disaggregated for key groups of students and were not being held accountable for the students' improvement (Hauser & Koenig, 2011).

The education of today's youth is necessary for the social and economic success of the country. The education system has a critical role in preparing and developing the increasingly diverse youth for positions and careers in a technologically advanced society. If a school system fails to prepare the youth for these positions and careers, then the well-being of society and the nation is at risk of weakening. Students that drop out of school cost more to society than those that succeed and earn a high school diploma. High school dropouts, in the United States, are estimated to cost approximately $200 to $300 billion annually in cost as these individuals rely more on Medicaid and welfare, public assistance, and are more likely to be

incarcerated (Melville, 2006; Levin & Rouse, 2012; Stuit & Springer, 2010). In the state of California, high school dropouts cost $54 billion per year through a loss of taxable income, their reliance on food stamps, their reliance on housing sponsorships, the cost of Medicaid, and the loss of state and federal income tax credit (Stuit & Springer, 2010)

Failing to produce high school graduates is costing the nation and states an enormous amount of money. As a society, it is even more costly. The individual who fails to obtain a high school diploma also faces increased personal hardships. A high school dropout who fails to earn a high school diploma has a higher rate of unemployment, earns less money over the course of his/her lifetime than a high school graduate, has a higher rate of mortality, is more likely to be involved in risky behavior, is more likely to be incarcerated, is more likely to depend on public aid, and is less likely to vote (Belfield & Levin, 2007; Rumberger, 2011a). According to the U.S. Department of Education (2018), the likelihood of a dropout being unemployed or not employed is 10% higher than a peer that earned a high school diploma. High school dropouts are less healthy and are at greater risk of an early death when compared to a high school graduate (Pleis et al., 2010; Stuit & Springer, 2010). Further, approximately two-thirds of all inmates in the United States did not earn their high school diploma (Harlow, 2003; Melville, 2006).

With the goal of preventing dropouts, the public education system has provided alternative models of education for students throughout the years to address the notion that one size does not fit all and that students and families need different avenues, besides the traditional comprehensive model, to be successful. Alternative schools were established as early as the 1960s to facilitate a student-centered approach to learning (Lange & Sletten, 2002). Charter, magnet, dropout recovery, self-directed learning, independent study, and community schools are all examples of alternative schools developed meet the unique needs of each student (Edgar-

Smith & Palmer, 2015; Maillet, 2017; Raywid, 1994). Many of these schools have at its core mission the belief that the traditional comprehensive schools do not sufficiently address the needs of the students and re-engage them in their own learning (Edgar-Smith & Palmer, 2015; Maillet, 2017). According to Maillet (2017), alternative schools can provide all students, despite all these challenges, with an engaging educational experience by allowing unique ways of fostering relationships between teacher and student. Alternative schools play a critical role by providing a resource or alternative for students at risk of dropping out (Farrelly & Daniels, 2013).

Students at-risk of dropping out do not do so instantly or randomly, rather it takes some time before students decide to disengage from the school. Researchers have found that there was at least one personal risk factor in nearly 45% of all school-aged children, with at least 18% having more than one risk factor during their lifetime that leads to the student dropping out (Kominski et al., 2001). Internal and external factors attribute to students dropping out of school. Internally, the student's belief in him/herself influences whether he/she will disengage from school, while, externally, family, school, and environment play a role in students disengaging (Lessard et al., 2014).

The student's belief in himself, or his level of self-efficacy, is high, then individual is more willing to persevere (Bandura, 1997). At-risk high school students, with high levels of self-efficacy, who endured the hardships and successfully graduated from high school persevered by utilizing their resources and asking for help when needed, had the ability to establish strong positive relationships, had strong organizational and planning skills, and followed through on their decisions (Lessard et al., 2014). These resilient individuals viewed themselves as part of the solution and had control over their environment; these students, despite the at-risk factors, knew

that they could succeed and that they were in control of their own success. Resilient students also understood that they could reach out for help if necessary. These individuals looked for a solution as opposed to giving up.

Bandura (1997) states that self-efficacy is the theory that an individual's self-belief of his abilities and knowledge will influence the way he behaves or acts. It plays a vital role in the choices an individual makes when faced with a challenge (Bandura, 1986). Pajares (1996) found that self-efficacy has the ability to enhance academic outcomes. If the individual's perceived capabilities to be successful are high when introduced to new concepts and ideas in academics, then the individual will more likely be successful (Pajares, 1996; Usher & Pajares, 2006).  In addition, Alivernini and Lucidi (2011) found that self-efficacy has an important impact in reducing the possibility of a student dropping out of school. Unfortunately, there is a lack of research conducted on the role of self-efficacy on resilient dropouts that return to school and earn a high school diploma (Vijeila, 2019).

**Statement of the Problem**

Research has shown that self-efficacy has a role in determining an individual's willingness to move forward in the face of adversity or when confronted by obstacles. The lower the self-efficacy, the more likely the individual will give up when faced with an obstacle. On the other hand, the higher the self-efficacy, the more likely the individual will persist and overcome the obstacle. Bandura (1993) explains that self-efficacy beliefs increase an individual's willingness and resolve to be successful in school. The primary problem guiding this study was the high percent of high school dropouts, especially with a myriad of educational models (such as online, independent study, or continuation) available that can help students earn a diploma.  Despite the numerous research regarding high school dropouts in the United States,

there is a lack of information as to why do students, who have dropped out, decide to return and elect to enroll in an independent study high school to earn their high school diploma. There is no research on independent study high schools and why students elect to enroll in them to earn their high school diploma.

Additionally, there is little to no research on alternative schools. Hill (2007) found that there is a lack of research on alternative schools in California and surrounding states; the research is virtually nonexistent. Whether students are enrolled in continuation, independent study, or community schools, there is insufficient research being conducted to determine effective alternative schools. The little research published so far has primarily used quantitative methods to collect data in cross-case, statewide, or national studies. These studies focused on policies and trends in alternative education. In addition, the qualitative studies done on alternative studies have been primarily descriptive studies that focus on the school environment, student relationships, curriculum, and policy in order to identify the component that contributed to a successful school (Farrelly & Daniels, 2013). Unfortunately, much of the research does not incorporate the voices of the students (Brown, 2007; Daniels & Arapostathis, 2005). There is a need in the literature for an in-depth study of independent study from the viewpoint of the students (Farrelly & Daniels, 2013). The students are the ones attending these schools, and their perspective is vital in understanding how alternative schools affect the students academically, socially, and emotionally (Brown, 2007). In addition, there is no research that has been done on the independent study model, where students can attend and earn their diploma in lieu of attending and earning their high school diploma at a traditional comprehensive high school (Hill, 2007). As a result, it is imperative that research be conducted on the students that attended an independent study high school to complete their high school education and earn a high school

diploma, how independent study high schools met the needs of these students, and how these schools address the high school dropout issue.

**Purpose**

This phenomenological study explored the narratives of former students (between the ages of 18 and 24) who attended an independent study high school, an alternative educational setting, to complete high school credits and earn a high school diploma within the past five years of graduating. Previous studies have stated that self-efficacy can influence an individual's academic motivation and willingness to continue their coursework despite the obstacles and challenges they face. Although self-efficacy and academics have been studied at length, there is a lack of research connecting these areas to alternative educational models, and more specifically, an independent study high school setting. Since 2007, only two studies conducted research on the independent study model, where both examined the independent study model in the state of California, the type of students enrolled, the trend, and if these schools served a specific demographic (Barrat & Berliner, 2009; Hill, 2007). Neither study provided the opportunity for former or current students' voices. Thus, the goal of this study was to investigate and examine the voices of former students of an independent study high school to gain an understanding as to what factors led these individuals to enroll in an independent study high school and eventually to earn a high school diploma, as well as what does an independent study high school provide to these former students that the comprehensive schools did not.

**Theoretical Framework**

The research behind the theory of self-efficacy provides the framework for this study into young adults that returned to school after having dropped out of another high school setting. Self-efficacy refers to the belief or confidence the individual has in his abilities when presented

with a task or assignment (Bandura, 1986). Self-efficacy is a generative capability in which cognitive, social, emotional, and behavioral skill sets must be organized and effectively utilized when confronted by tasks or assignments (Bandura, 1986). Self-efficacy is focused on the belief that the individual has of his abilities when confronted with obstacles; it is not focused on the number of skills the individual has (Bandura, 1986). The strength in the individual's conviction in his own effectiveness will determine whether he will even attempt to cope with the situation or avoid it altogether (Bandura, 1977).

Self-efficacy influences an individual's effort, the ability to cope, and the level of tenacity when confronted with challenges (Bandura, 1977; 1986). Efficacy beliefs function as a vital component of an individual's competence (Bandura, 1986). As a result, people with similar skill sets may perform poorly, adequately, or exceptionally depending on their beliefs of personal efficacy (Bandura, 1986). Schunk and Pajares (2005) state that individuals with higher self-efficacy are more likely to maintain extensive effort, continually reevaluate their growth, and monitor their results. Self-efficacy is malleable. Self-efficacy beliefs come from four different sources: mastery experiences, vicarious experiences, verbal persuasion, and physiological state (Bandura, 1986; Pajares, 2003; Schunk & Pajares, 2005).

These four sources of information influence and can increase the individual's self-efficacy. Mastery experiences provide the individual with a primary source of efficacy information by proving to the individual that he can accomplish the task or challenge successfully (Bandura, 1997). Vicarious experiences can be gained from observing others in similar abilities and attributes (race, gender, or age) which can lead to a strong foundation of self-efficacy (Usher & Pajares, 2008). Verbal persuasions are identified as influential communication from self, peers, or parents/guardians that assist in reinforcing or breaking down

an individual's self-efficacy (Bandura, 1986; Hattie & Timperley, 2007). An individual's physiological state plays a role in how he believes in his own abilities. Individuals that have a greater ability to self-regulate their emotions and their anxiety have higher self-efficacy levels than those who do not (Zimmerman, 2000).

Self-efficacy is the theory that an individual's self-belief on his competencies and efforts will influence the way he behaves, or acts, based on the task at hand (Bandura, 1997). Self-efficacy provides the framework to understand where students find the intrinsic motivation to move forward. By understanding what students have been through academically and by understanding their mastery levels, their vicarious experiences, the verbal persuasions they receive, and their physiological states, self-efficacy provides a foundation for understanding how to impact student outcomes (Bandura, 1986; Schunk, 1991). Self-efficacy is critical in understanding why re-engaged youth are successful. Further, the study of self-efficacy has increased in the education field because self-efficacy has shown itself to be a predictor of a student's academic achievement, motivation, and belief in success (Usher & Pajares, 2008). Studies have been done to determine the role that self-efficacy has in education and academic success while the student is in school, however, there is a lack of information regarding students that dropout and the role that self-efficacy has for when students decided to re-engage in their education.

In utilizing self-efficacy as the framework for this study, the research examined how four sources of self-efficacy affect the individual's academic motivation or pursuit in earning a high school diploma. It provided the lens to determine how the four frames of self-efficacy affect the former students as they dropped out, re-enrolled in an independent study high school, and eventually earn a high school diploma.

**Research Questions**

The following questions were developed for this study to help understand the role of independent study in the lives of the students that attend there:

- What factors led high school dropouts to return to high school?

- What factors led a re-engaged youth to stay in school and graduate?

- What does an independent study high school provide re-engaged youths?

Understanding the factors that led former students to drop out of high school, only to later re-engage in their education by enrolling in an independent study high school and their experiences in such a school model helped the researcher understand the role that self-efficacy has in the student's academic success. Further, by listening to the stories of these former students and gaining their perspective, they provided essential input to answering the third research question.

**Significance of the Study**

There are numerous studies that examine the reasons why students drop out or leave high school prior to completing their high school graduation requirements and obtaining a high school diploma, however, there is a lack of studies that investigates as to why the students return to school and earn their high school diploma (Bridgeland et al., 2006; Levin, 2012; Rumberger, 2011b; Rumberger & Lim, 2008). An investigation of the factors leading up to students dropping out of school and the reasons why they return to school will provide educators with the information necessary to identify and better support students at risk of dropping out, provide a pathway to re-engage dropouts, and increase the opportunities to help student succeed, thus decreasing the dropout rate.

As a result, this study would be valuable to teachers, principals, and district administrators in creating informed decisions for interventions on preventing high school dropouts and recovering those that dropped out. The goal of high schools is to graduate students and prepare them for post-secondary goals such as college or work. It is, therefore, imperative that school personnel at the local and district level understand what is causing students to drop out from the comprehensive school. This study will provide a viewpoint of those who were not successful in a traditional comprehensive program and provide insight to their needs and how the schools and the school districts can provide the necessary resources so that students can be successful and earn their high school diploma through the independent study model. The description of the individuals' viewpoints and experiences of dropping out of school and later re-engaging and earning a high school diploma can be vital in developing programs, interventions, curriculum, and professional developments geared towards improving students' self-efficacy, which in turn will increase students' academic motivation. In addition, this study may also increase the conversation on school policies and programs aimed at increasing graduates and decreasing the dropout rate.

**Assumptions**

The following assumptions were made throughout this study:

- Attaining a high school diploma is worthwhile and advantageous to adolescents in today's society.

- The respondents were open, honest, and credible in their answers to the questions being asked of them in the interview.

- The respondents can read, speak, and understand English and comprehend the meaning of the interview questions.

- The respondents opted to attend an independent study high school of their choice and volition and were not forced to attend.

- An individual's self-efficacy can influence and impact their choice to attend an independent study high school to complete and earn a high school diploma.

**Limitations of the Study**

This study was conducted under the following limitations:

- The study was delimited to students that graduated from an independent study high school within the past five years.

- The study was delimited to the Southern California area.

- The study was delimited to 14 high school graduates from two different independent study high schools. Each school will provide a minimum of three participants each.

- The participants represented a small population of students who attended an independent study high school.

- The study was delimited to students who dropped out of high school and then enrolled in an independent study high school program.

- The sample was not an entirely random sampling as it included participants who volunteered to be interviewed and participate in this study.

- The findings were limited to the subject and were not intended to generalize the experiences of all re-engaged youth.

**Definitions**

- *Alternative education.* A public school that addresses the needs of students that cannot be met in a traditional comprehensive school (Carver & Lewis, 2010). These

- *Interpretative phenomenological analysis.* A qualitative research approach that is focused to the examination of how individuals make sense of their major life experiences (J. Smith et al., 2009).

- *Re-engaged youth.* Students that dropout, re-enroll, and stay engaged in school long enough to receive the needed interventions and ultimately graduated with a high school diploma (Barrat & Berliner, 2016).

- *Resilient dropout.* A high school dropout that later re-enrolled in a school and earned a high school diploma (Vijeila, 2019).

- *Self-efficacy.* Based on Bandura's (1986) theory that can be described as how an individual's thoughts, beliefs, and feelings can affect the way they behave or act. The individual's belief in his or her own abilities to either persevere or surrender when faced with obstacles or challenges.

**Organization of the Study**

This research study is presented in five chapters. Chapter 1 presents an overview of the study's purpose: to utilize a qualitative research method approach to investigate the factors that lead some high school students to drop out and later re-enroll in an independent study high school to earn a high school diploma. This is explored by trying to understand the relationship between a student's self-efficacy and willingness to return to school after dropping out. This study focused on examining the experiences of young adults that attended an independent study high school. In the course of the chapter, the three research questions that the study was designed to address were set forth and the significance of the study was stated. In addition, the study's assumptions and limitations were noted. Finally, the terms used in the study were defined.

Chapter 2 presents a review of the related literature with a review of the history and origin of the high school dropout, alternative schools, and the theory of self-efficacy and the role it has in education. Chapter 3 presents the methodology utilized. It includes the research questions, the investigative questions, the selection process of the participants, and the process for obtaining, synthesizing, and analyzing the data. Chapter 4 presents the findings. The findings presented are related to the research questions to the study. Chapter 5 provides a review of the main findings of the study. From these findings, the conclusion, discussion, and recommendation for practice, policy, and further research are included. This chapter concludes with closing comments.

**Chapter 2: Review of Literature**

**Overview**

In Chapter 1, the critical need for research on the alternative educational model of independent study was established. There is a lack of information pertaining to independent study high schools, and as a result there is a need to document, describe, and analyze the individuals that attended an independent study high school, graduated, and earned a high school diploma through this alternative education model. In this chapter, the literature on dropouts, alternative education, and self-efficacy are reviewed. The review of literature explores alternative education approaches that may provide an opportunity for students to earn their high school diploma such as the independent study approach. Further, this chapter will also establish a theoretical framework through the theory of self-efficacy. Self-efficacy provides a framework to help understand where and how students find the motivation to succeed. It also provides an understanding of how students increase their levels of self-efficacy, which can then be used to create and tailor programs and schools to support re-engaged youth.

The literature review was conducted to explore how self-efficacy plays a role in the lives of individuals and how they make the choice of attending an alternative school to complete their high school diploma. The purpose of the literature review is to explore how the identified sections of the literature may explain how the participants in this study make sense of their world and how the participants find pathways back towards high school. The review of the literature begins with an analysis of the term dropout, the history of dropouts, and the importance of reducing dropout rates in the United States. It will then examine what an alternative school is, the types of students served, and the purpose of an alternative school, specifically an independent study school. Also, this literature review will include the study's theoretical framework: self-

efficacy (see Figure 1). Finally, this chapter will examine the four sources of self-efficacy: past performance experiences, vicarious experiences, verbal persuasion, and physiological states. The chapter will also examine the effects that self-efficacy has on motivation and on academics.

By utilizing self-efficacy as the framework for this study, the research will examine how mastery skills, vicarious experiences, verbal persuasions, and physiological states affect an individual's academic motivation or pursuit in earning a high school diploma. It will provide the lens to understand how former students that once dropped out of school, re-enrolled in an independent study school, and completed their high school education by earning a high school diploma.

**Figure 1**

*Framework for the Literature Review*
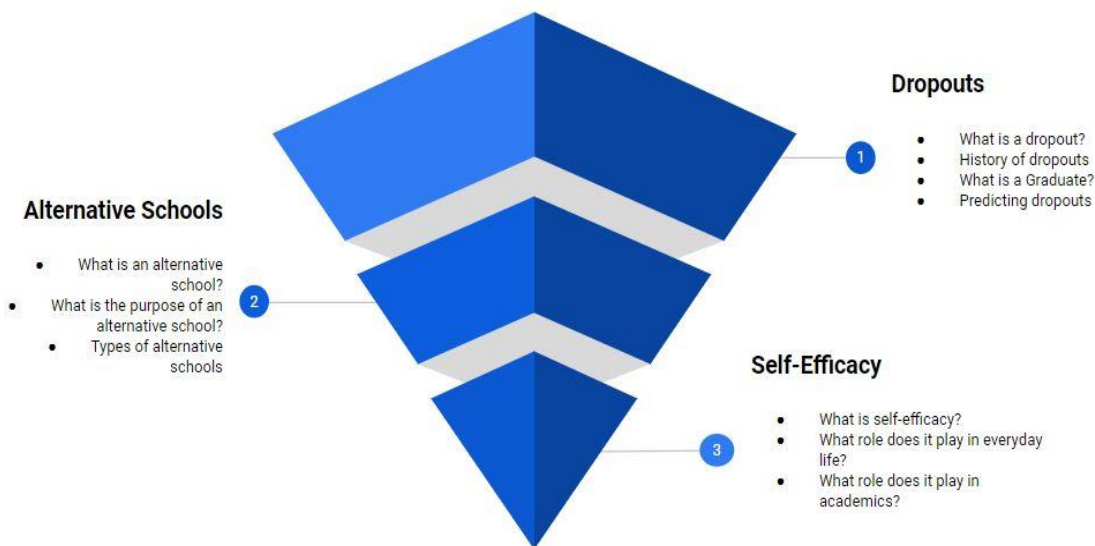


**Theoretical Framework**

Self-efficacy is the individual's confidence in his own abilities and the results he believes can be achieved through his efforts (Bandura, 1977). Self-efficacy plays a vital role in

the choices an individual makes when confronted by a challenge (Bandura, 1986). The higher the level of self-efficacy, the more likely the individual will take on the challenge, persevere, and persist (Cervone, 2000). For example, when confronted by the academic challenges that a school may present, students who have a higher level of self-efficacy are more likely to have a higher willingness to overcome the challenges presented than those with a low level of self-efficacy (Christle & Yell, 2008). Individuals with lower levels of self-efficacy are more likely to engage in negative behavior and potentially drop out of school altogether (Bandura, 1997). Yet, research also indicates that self-efficacy is malleable and can alter positively or negatively through the four sources: mastery experiences, vicarious experiences, verbal persuasion, and physiological states (Bandura, 1997).

There have been studies in understanding how self-efficacy can be utilized to prevent students from dropping out of school. Providing students with the opportunity and scaffolding to be successful and master the task presented in front of them allows the students to increase their self-efficacy through mastery experiences (Lodewyk & Winne, 2005). Vicariously, providing role models to help students understand that there are other individuals similar to them that have been successful and that they too can be successful (Bandura, 1997). Verbally, providing the students with authentic feedback focusing on effort can boost the student's self-efficacy in a positive way (Dweck, 2000). Physiologically, provide the students with coping strategies so that when they are confronted by challenges, their initial reaction is not to avoid it, rather to find a way to overcome it (Bandura et al., 1980; Ginsburg & Jablow, 2011). Yet, there is a lack of research on how to support students that re-engage back into school after dropping out. The research undertaken in this study seeks to investigate what facets of self-efficacy supports re-

engaged youth that dropped out, re-enrolled in an independent study high school, and eventually

graduate with their high school diploma.

**Dropouts**

The stigma of not completing high school and being a dropout is a relatively new

phenomenon with origins tracing back to the 1960s (Dorn, 1993; Kamenetz, 2015a). Prior to the

1960s, the label of a high school dropout was not as profound as it is today because fewer

individuals graduated from high school. The graduation rate in 1900 was six percent, 16% in

1920, 49% in 1940, and 76% in 1960 (U.S. Census Bureau, 1978). Since the 1960s, the

graduation rate has slowly increased to approximately 85% in the year 2016-2017 school year

(Kerr & Boyington, 2019). As the high school graduation rates increased and became the

norm, society began to adopt the belief that the role of schools would be to prepare students for

work (Kelly, 1993). As a result, as more students began to graduate from high school, employers

began to use educational credentials as a means of screening applicants for positions within their

organizations (Dorn, 1993). Once high school graduation became the standard, and the norm,

being labeled a dropout became more noticeable, to the point where it is considered an epidemic

in America (Bridgeland et al., 2006).

Although earning a high school diploma has been the expectation since the 1960s, a high

school dropout is not uncommon (Kamenetz, 2015b). In the United States, 15% of all students

will fail to complete high school and obtain their high school diploma (Kerr & Boyington, 2019).

The high school class of 2010 had 3 million of the 4.3 million graduates who had obtained their

high school diploma, while the remaining 1.3 million failed to graduate with many being

considered high school dropouts (Rumberger, 2011a; Synder & Dillow, 2011). A high school

dropout, according to the federal government, is defined as the following:

- An individual who was enrolled in a school at some time during the previous school year;

- An individual who was not enrolled at the beginning (October 1st) of the current school year;

- An individual who has not graduated from high school or completed a state- or district-approved education program;

- Or an individual who does not meet any of the following exclusionary conditions: transferred to another public school district, private school, or state- or district-approved education program; temporary absence due to suspension or school-approved education program; or death (Cataldi et al., 2009; Laird et al., 2007; Rumberger, 2011b).

The above criteria have been continuously updated and are now indicative of a universally applied criterion that helps give definition to what constitutes a dropout in the literature. A dropout is identified as an individual who is not accounted for on October 1st of a given school year, nor has he graduated or completed a state- or district-approved program in lieu of the high school diploma such as the General Educational Development (GED) test.

Despite the federal government's definition of a high school dropout, understanding how many students become classified as dropouts is unclear. There are too many ways to calculate the graduation and dropout rates, as a result, the number of students that qualify for the designation of dropout may be misleading (Bridgeland et al., 2006). The data commonly used to determine how many students have dropped out are based on school administrative records for student enrollment, students that leave school for any reason prior to earning their high school diploma, and those that obtain a high school diploma. Further, each individual state has its own criteria for

determining who is considered a dropout and who is considered a graduate (EdTrust, 2003). For example, in North Carolina, the graduation rate is based on how many ninth-graders receive a high school diploma in four years or less, the rate does not factor in the total number of students enrolling in the ninth grade (EdTrust, 2003). Essentially, this means that if only 30% of ninth graders obtained a high school diploma, then North Carolina would have a 100% graduation rate; any student who dropped out would be ignored and not be counted as a dropout. Another concern with using state self-reported data is that some states have failed to report any information to the federal government regarding their high school graduation rates and dropout rates (EdTrust, 2003). States are under pressure to produce results and show that they are addressing the nation's dropout crisis and producing high school graduates. If the data reveals that the schools are not performing as well as they should be, then the states are less likely to report the data to the federal government or they may adjust their definition of who constitutes as a high school graduate, much like North Carolina does (EdTrust, 2005). As a result, relying on the districts or schools to report on the number of dropouts, has led to the questioning and the authenticity of the reported graduation rates and dropout rates (Greene & Winters, 2005).

Furthermore, regardless of the inconsistencies in reporting and inaccurate data, the high school dropout rate is an epidemic and cause for concern in the United States (Bridgeland et al., 2006). With approximately 15% of students not graduating from high school, it is imperative that schools find ways to support students and help them obtain a high school diploma. Levin and Rouse (2012) found that if the United States could reduce the number of dropouts by 50%, there would be almost 700,000 new graduates a year. Each graduate produced provides a net benefit of approximately $127,000, over the graduate's lifetime, to the economy (Levin & Rouse, 2012).

In addition, data reveal that the cost of a high school dropout affects more than just the student; it affects society as a whole. Dropouts have trouble in the labor market, are more likely to be living in poverty, and earn $14,000 less annually, or $412,000 less over a lifetime than peers that graduate from high school which in turn leads to less taxable income (Stuit & Springer, 2010). High school dropouts increase the state's incarceration costs, as these they are 63 times more likely to be incarcerated than those who earned a high school diploma (Stuit & Springer, 2010). When localized to the state level, if California was to eliminate its dropout problem, the state would save approximately $2.8 billion (14% of the state's budget) annually in spending by reducing the amount of youth incarcerated, decreasing the dependency on state welfare and Medicaid, while increasing the amount of taxable income the state will gain (Levin & Rouse, 2012; Stuit & Springer, 2010). California would be able to earn an additional $958 million in taxable income annually, save over $1 billion in annual medical expenses, and save over $1.4 billion in incarceration costs if every student graduated from high school (Stuit & Springer, 2010).

**Federal Legislation**

Bridgeland et al. (2006) refer to the high school dropout rate as a silent epidemic because of the fact that the public is largely unaware of the nation's high school dropout rate. Fortunately, the federal and state governments recognize that this is an issue and have developed goals and legislation to increase the high school graduation rate and decrease dropout rates. In the 1960s, President Kennedy began addressing the issue by starting a nationwide campaign to increase the publicity and awareness of the problem and to help local school districts in identifying and helping potential dropouts (Rumberger, 2011a). With the importance of obtaining a high school diploma being pushed into the forefront of the nation, everyone began to take notice. Since

President Kennedy, there has been a series of national legislation that has highlighted this issue as an important one to address.

Beginning in 1965, Congress passed the Elementary and Secondary Education Assistance (ESEA) Act which provided federal funding for public schools, specifically targeting low-income schools, as a resource to provide support to the schools in preventing dropouts (Keiner, 2014). In the 1980s, the National Commission on Excellence in Education published "A Nation at Risk" which revealed that the United States' public education system was failing and students were being outperformed by their peers in other nations (Keiner, 2014). A Nation at Risk was the first report that analyzed and dissected the public education system in the United States and revealed that the U.S. was not where it believed it was at in supporting students and graduating them. The report showed a system that was underachieving nationally and internationally as nearly 40% of seniors could not successfully draw inferences from written materials and only 33% could solve multi-step math problems (U.S. Department of Education, 1983). A Nation at Risk made recommendations that were unheard of at the time including standardizing the expectation of courses students should take to graduate from high school, setting high expectations, increasing the length and duration of school annually, increasing teacher pay, and addressing how the federal government could support all students (U.S. Department of Education, 1983). As a result of the publication of A Nation at Risk in 1988, President George H. W. Bush and the nation's governors collaboratively worked to set the goal of decreasing the dropout rate to 10% or lower by the year 2000 (Keiner, 2014; Rumberger, 2011b; U.S. Department of Education, 1990 ).

However, the goal of decreasing the dropout rate to 10% or lower was not met in the year 2000. As a result, the federal government and the states began to address the dropout epidemic

with more urgency. In 2001, Congress passed the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) which included a dropout prevention program that helped provide resources to the states and the local education agencies (LEA's) to develop a plan for dropout prevention (U.S. Department of Education, 2001). In 2009, President Obama and his administration pledged $3.5 billion to transform the nation's lowest-performing schools and $50 million to invest in innovative dropout-prevention and recovery strategies through the Race to the Top grants (Keiner, 2014; Rumberger, 2011b). Most recently, in 2015, the NCLB was replaced by the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) which reauthorized the ESEA Act to continue the federal government's commitment to student success (U.S. Department of Education, 2015). The ESSA is the nation's law for all public schools that made states adopt more rigorous academic standards in reading, math, and science (such as the Common Core State Standards), held schools accountable for high school graduation rates, required states and school districts to have a plan in supporting schools that have high dropout rates, and required states to have plans to support all students, including, but not limited to, students in special education, English learners, and those in low-income homes (Klein, 2016).

**Defining a High School Graduate**

In 2005, the National Governors Association (NGA), concerned about graduation rates, came to an agreement on uniform method of calculating the high school graduation rate throughout the nation; this, in turn, helped determine who was or was not a high school dropout (DePaoli et al., 2016). Once the NGA came to a consensus and developed a formula to calculate graduates, the U.S. Department of Education then took and refined the formula to become what is known as the Adjusted Cohort Graduation Rate (ACGR; DePaoli et al., 2016). The ACGR, established during the 2010-2011 school year, tracks a cohort of students who enter

high school together, as first-time ninth-graders, and graduate in four years or less with a high

school diploma while also accounting for students who transfer in or out of the school or passes

away (DePaoli et al., 2016). A high school graduate, for the first time, was now given a

nationally accepted definition. A high school graduate is a student who enters the ninth grade the

first time and graduates with a high school diploma within four years or less (DePaoli et al.,

2016). The ACGR is a formula that provides the federal government and states a uniform

measurement that tracks all public school students and the percentage that graduates from high

school in four years or less with a high school diploma (see Figure 2).

**Figure 2**

*2015-2016 ACGR for Public High School Students by Race/Ethnicity*
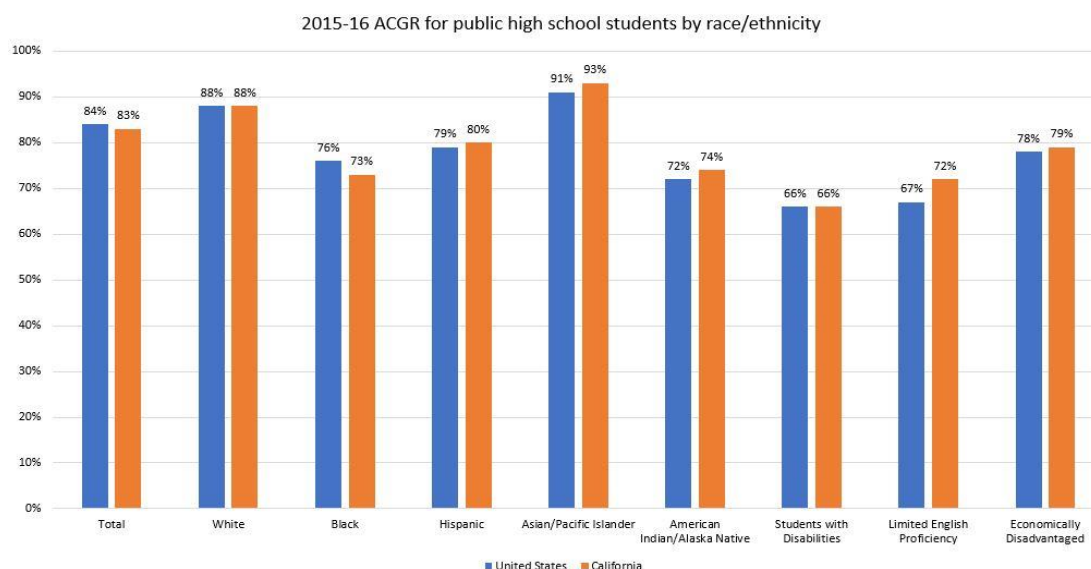


*Note*: The ACGR is the percentage of public high school freshmen (9th grade) who graduate
with a high school diploma within 4 years. Adapted from U.S. Department of Education, Office
of Elementary and Secondary Education, Consolidated State Performance Report, 2015-16. See
Digest of Education Statistics, Table 219.46. In the public domain.

**Predicting Dropouts**

In 2009, President Obama had a lofty goal that the United States of America produces the highest proportion of college graduates in the world by the year 2020 (Fry, 2017). However, this goal is not obtainable without first addressing the high school dropout epidemic by first understanding the reasons why students leave school before obtaining their high school diploma. It is difficult to pinpoint one reason as to why a student drops out as there is no singular variable that forces a student to drop out of high school; rather it is the result of disengagement and withdrawal from school that may have begun as early as elementary school (Fleming, 2012; Levin, 2012; Orfield, 2004). Further, dropping out of high school is not the result of a clear or simple decision made by the student, but a complicated one that is associated with the individual student, his family, and real-world events (Bridgeland et al., 2006). Levin (2012) states that the reasons students drop out of schooling are not due to one isolated factor, but rather a variety of factors compounded together. The reasons that students dropped out included: a lack of connection to the school, that school was boring, a lack of motivation, school being too difficult, real-world events (finances or home life), absenteeism, or thinking that an alternative route, such as the GED, would be easier (Bridgeland et al., 2006; Rotermund, 2007; Rumberger, 2011b; Rumberger & Lim, 2008). Students dropping out is a combination of factors and not just one factor. For example, having low income is not the reason why a student may drop out, but the combination of factors associated with low income such as unstable living conditions, poorer nutrition or health care, or fewer resources at home that may lead a student to dropout (Levin, 2012).

Feldman et al. (2017) identified the four stages of dropping out: initial disengagement, early skipping, serious truancy, and dropping out. In Stage 1, initial disengagement, the student

begins to develop a disconnect or develops negatives thoughts towards school or learning (Feldman et al., 2017). The student's cognitive, emotional, and behavioral concept of school engagement is reflective in what the student is doing in class: tuning out the teacher, ignoring homework, or failing courses (Feldman et al., 2017; Fredricks et al., 2004). During the Stage 2, early skipping, the student begins to avoid classes in which he or she did not feel any connection to the teacher or felt that the teacher did not care (Feldman et al., 2017). Continuously skipping courses will eventually lead to Stage 3, serious truancy. According to Feldman et al. (2017), serious truancy begins when students skip multiple classes or even a whole day of schooling; students that miss so much schooling will then have significant academic failure as the students fall behind in the classroom and perform poorly on exams. Once the student begins to fail enough courses and he feels that school is unnecessary, he will eventually enter Stage 4 and dropout (Feldman et al., 2017; Levin, 2012)**.**

**Four Predictors of Dropping Out**

Regardless of the reasons why or how the student got to the point where he felt the need to drop out, there are predictors that can determine whether a student will drop out and not earn their high school diploma. Suh et al. (2007) found that the student's background and circumstance are indicative of a student's disengagement and withdrawal from the school. Further, Kominski et al. (2001) discovered that over 45% of students in America have at a minimum one personal risk factor and that at least 18% of all school-aged children have multiple risk factors. These different predictors of dropping out can be categorized in four ways: educational performance, behaviors, attitudes, and student background (DePaoli et al., 2017; Rumberger & Lim, 2008).

*Educational Performance*

Rumberger and Lim (2008) found that test scores and grades are can predict whether a student will drop out or graduate. The two found that higher test scores and grades were predictors of high school graduates; conversely, the lower the test scores and grades, the more likely a student would drop out. Academic performance in both classes and testing at the elementary and middle schools were predictors of students dropping out or graduating at the high school level. The results were more consistent with grades than test scores due to grades being a reflection of the student's ability and effort throughout the course of a school year and test scores being a reflection of one or two days of standardized testing (Rumberger & Lim, 2008). Furthermore, students that failed courses in middle school and high school had were more likely to drop out instead of graduating (Balfanz et al., 2007; Feldman et al., 2017)**.**

*Behaviors*

A student's behavior within and outside the school has been linked to whether a student will drop out or graduate. The more engaged the student is within the school; the more likely the student will graduate (Rumberger & Lim, 2008). Engagement can be seen as the student's active involvement in school work (attending class, completing assignments, and being challenged mentally) and in the social aspect of school (extracurricular activities such as sports or clubs; Finn & Rock, 1997; Rumberger & Lim, 2008). The higher levels of engagement in both school work and extracurricular activities, the less likely the student will drop out of school. Even at the elementary level, engagement reduced the odds of dropping out of high school (Alexander et al., 2001). Further, when engaging in the social aspect of school, peers play a vital role in increasing or decreasing the odds dropping out. Having friends that engage in criminal behavior or who have dropped out increases the odds of dropping out for the student as well (Saiz & Zoido,

2005). The strongest behavioral predictor of dropping out is absenteeism (Rumberger, 2011b; Schargel et al., 2007). The less often the student attends school, the more likely he will drop out.

*Attitudes*

Values, beliefs, and attitudes of the students are related to their behavior, performance, and whether they graduate or not. According to Rumberger and Lim (2008), an individual's values, beliefs, and attitudes are psychological factors that include motivation, values, goals, and a range of self-perception about self and their abilities. These factors can change over time, especially during periods of early adolescence. For some, the early-adolescent years can be the start of the downward spiral that leads into academic failure and school dropout; some students see changes in their interest in school, motivation, and confidence in their abilities during this time. As a result, negative responses to school can also increase test anxiety, learned helplessness, and self-consciousness that impede their ability to concentrate (Eccles, 1999).

A student's self-perception is a predictor to whether a student will be successful and graduate with a high school diploma or not. Dropout rates are higher among students who have lower educational and occupational goals. Students that found value in school and believed they were capable of achieving success in schools were more likely to graduate with a diploma (Rumberger & Lim, 2008). These students set goals and have the belief that they can control their successes. Students that value school and believe that it is necessary or instrumental in meeting their short-term or long-term goals are more likely to complete schooling than those who do not (Eccles & Wigfield, 2002). Further, students, as early as first grade, who had an external locus of control, the belief that they had little control over their own destiny, had a higher rate of dropping out of school than those who believed they had control over their own success (Alexander et al., 1997; Rumberger, 1983).

*Background*

The student's demographics are linked to high school graduation or high school dropout. Students that are minorities, live in a single-parent household, and come from low socioeconomic status have an increased risk of dropping out (Rumberger, 2011b; Rumberger & Lim, 2008). Dropout rates are higher for males than females, higher for African Americans, Hispanics, and Native Americans than Asians and Whites, and are higher for foreign-born students than native-born students (Laird et al., 2007). The final demographic characteristic in determining whether a student will drop out is whether the student has a disability. The dropout rate of a student with a learning disability is 26% and one with an emotional or behavioral disorder is 50%, whereas, students without a disability had a dropout rate of 15% (Reschly & Christenson, 2006). The student's demographic has a high correlation between whether the student will graduate with a diploma or not (see Figure 3 and Table 1).

**Figure 3**

*2015-16 Dropout Rates by Race/Ethnicity and Sex*
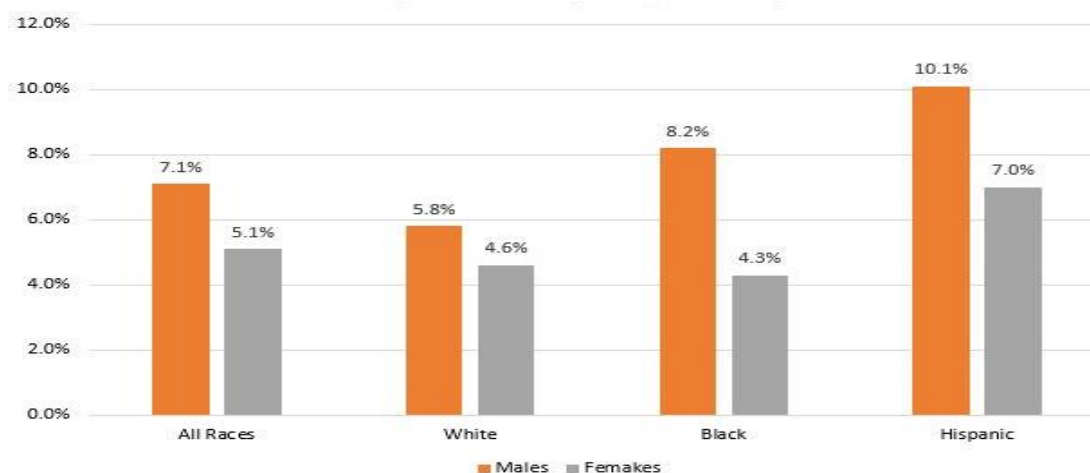


*Note*: The dropout rate is based on the percentage of 16- to 24-year-olds who are not enrolled in school and have not earned a high school diploma or equivalent. Adapted from U.S. Department of Education, Office of Elementary and Secondary Education, Consolidated State Performance Report, 2015-16. See Digest of Education Statistics, Table 219.70. In the public domain.

By understanding the four dropout predictors (educational performance, behaviors, attitudes, and student background), schools and educators can provide support to students exhibiting any of these predictors. Students with poor educational performances can be provided with additional tutoring or afterschool support to assist in their education (Rumberger & Lim, 2008). Students with behavior issues can be provided with means of connecting them to the school through extracurricular activities such as clubs or sports (Suh & Suh, 2006). Those struggling with understanding the benefits of school or even struggling with a strong sense of self-efficacy can benefit from identifying a long-term goal to strive for as they attend school and look at beyond school (Rumberger & Lim, 2008). Although, schools and educators cannot change a student's background or demographic, they can support the students by providing the additional resources and wraparound services necessary for the student to be successful while also focusing on the other three dropout predictors (Laird et al., 2007; Reschly & Christenson, 2006).

**Table 1**

*Drop Out Factors*

| Educational performance | Behaviors | Attitudes | Background |
|---|---|---|---|
| • Test scores <br> • Grades | • Engagement <br> • Extracurricular activities | • Motivation <br> • Self-perception <br> • Goals | • Demographics |
| Students who perform poorly on tests or are failing classes are more likely to drop out than those who do well on tests and are passing classes. | Students who are more involved in school activities and events are less likely to drop out. It is important to find ways to connect students with their passions or interests at school. | Students who see themselves as successful are more likely to graduate than those who do not see themselves as being successful. Further students who see school as a way to achieve their goals are more likely to graduate from high school. | A lack of resources provided to students of low socioeconomic status, English learners, minorities, or those with disabilities, increases the likelihood they will not graduate from high school. |

Given the complexity of reporting a high school dropout and a high school graduate, as well as the variety of reasons that students leave school and end up becoming a dropout, it is important to understand that once a student drops out of school their option becomes limited as individuals in society. It is important to develop a "second-chance" system for these dropouts to become re-engaged and successful (Bloom, 2010).

**Second-Chance Systems**

Bloom (2010) states that it is important for the nation to develop a "second-chance" system to re-engage and redirect dropouts to be engaged and successful members of society. High school dropouts experience the most difficulty and have the most challenges in making the transition from school to productive activities in the post-school training, education, and employment (Rumberger & Lamb, 2003). In order to re-engage dropouts, Almeida et al. (2006) found that it is important that second-chance systems build on the students' aspirations and reflect the demands of a knowledge-based economy. Schools that provide more than just a high school diploma are vital to providing dropouts the second chance. Schools that create partnerships and focus on the high school diploma alongside any combination of college degree, certification courses, or work leads to economic self-sufficiency and provides society with individuals ready for the labor force (Almeida et al., 2006; Rumberger & Lamb, 2003). Further, these systems can help develop the soft-skills that many employers are looking for such as punctuality, perseverance, and the ability to work in teams (Rumberger & Lamb, 2003).

Furthermore, there are already second-chance systems in place through a variety of federal and state programs such as the Workforce Investment Opportunity Act (WIOA), Job Corps, Conservation Corps, or through a variety of alternative schools that have not been developed nationally (Bloom, 2010). Despite these second-chance systems in place, there is a

lack of information on their successes or failures to build upon as the systems have not been developed nationally, but more at local levels. There is a lack of information on alternative schools, particularly the independent study model and how it is a second-chance system.

**Alternative Schools**

*Characteristics*

According to Aron (2006), there is currently no standard definition for alternative schools. In 2002, 48 states had some type of alternative education legislation, with only 34 states having a formal definition with each one being different from one another (Lange & Sletten, 2002; Lehr et al., 2008; Porowski et al., 2014). Federally, an alternative school is defined as a public school that addresses the needs of students that cannot be met in a regular school by providing a nontraditional education, or by serving as a support to traditional comprehensive schools (Sable et al., 2010). The definition provided by the United States Department of Education as cited by Carver and Lewis is:

> Alternative schools and programs are designed to address the needs of students that typically cannot be met in regular schools. The students who attend alternative schools and programs are typically at risk of educational failure (as indicated by poor grades, truancy, disruptive behavior, pregnancy, or similar factors associated with temporary or permanent withdrawal from school. (Carver & Lewis, 2010, p. 1)

The latter part of this definition is consistent with how the definition has narrowed for alternative schools being known as serving students who are considered "at-risk" for dropping out (Aron, 2006). Alternative schools are typically characterized by small size, one-on-one interaction between teachers and students, supportive environments, opportunities for students to

engage in decision making, and founded on the belief that one size does not fit all and that students require different avenues for learning (Lehr et al., 2008).

*Purpose*

Alternative schools thrived during the 1960s due to an increase in financial support through federal funding from ESEA, which provided public schools, including alternative schools, the ability to serve disadvantaged and minority students (Kelly, 1993; Young, 1990). In the 1960s and the 1970s, many public alternative schools were known as *Open Schools*, which were schools of choice, and had autonomy in learning and pace, a non-competitive evaluation, and a student-centered approach (Lange & Sletten, 2002). Many of today's alternative schools, such as magnet schools and charter schools, embrace several principles of the Open Schools, such as smaller classroom sizes, being a school of choice, theme-based schools, and authentic assessments (Lange & Sletten, 2002; Raywid, 1994;). Unfortunately, with the release of *A Nation at Risk* in 1983, the role of alternate education was reduced to one that focused on remediation and dropout prevention (Young, 1990).

Alternative schools have a variety of focus from having different instructional approaches to meeting the needs of specific students to providing unique learning opportunities such as one-on-one student to teacher ratios, a curriculum designed based on a specific theme, or providing flexible scheduling that meets the needs of the students (Barr & Parrett, 1997). Many of these schools engage in the belief that the traditional public school education does not sufficiently address the needs of the students by re-engaging the students in their own learning (Edgar-Smith & Palmer, 2015; Maillet, 2017). Farrelly and Daniels (2013) found that alternative education plays a vital role in addressing the opportunity gap the public education system by providing a resource or alternative for students who are considered at-risk of dropping out of school. They

can provide an engaging and educational experience for all students, especially those with challenging behaviors, low motivation, and failing grades (Maillet, 2017). According to Barr and Parrett (1997), students, in which the traditional school format did not work for them, become more engaged in their learning, their attitudes become more positive about school, and many begin to develop positive personal goals for the first time in their lives in these alternative school settings.

The purpose of these schools, despite their differences in format, is to serve those that are at risk of becoming a dropout by meeting the needs of the students academically, emotionally, and behaviorally (Cable et al., 2009; Edgar-Smith & Palmer, 2015). Students that attend alternative schools have a unique academic and social need that is addressed through an independent plan developed for each student (Murray & Holt, 2014). These schools were created to fulfill the specific need based on the idea that the one size does not fit all approach through a relevant and engaging curriculum (Cable et al., 2009; Barr & Parrett, 1997). Alternative schools provide students a different path to obtain a high school diploma (Farrelly & Daniels, 2013).

*Student Relationships*

How a student perceives his school plays a significant factor in whether he will engage in the learning process (Edgar-Smith & Palmer, 2015). The foundation of student success is rooted in trust and positive relationships (Maillet, 2017). Students who feel that they belong and are willing to participate in their own learning are the ones who are more likely to graduate (Edgar-Smith & Palmer, 2015; Murry & Holt, 2014). As a result, students are successful in alternative schools because they are able to develop strong and positive relationships with the teachers, feel cared for at the school, and understand that the teachers are committed to them and their success (Edgar-Smith & Palmer, 2015; Murry & Holt, 2014; Zolkoski et al., 2016).

Further, alternative schools are able to provide smaller teacher to student ratios, which expands the role of the teacher to that of counselor, advisor, and mentor (Murry & Holt, 2014). This allows the students to have someone they can confide in, come to for advice, and most importantly, someone they trust to help them move forward in schooling. The smaller student-teacher ratio allows for the teachers to develop a deeper and stronger bond with the students and their families, help them instill hope into the students, and allow the teachers to be relentless in their pursuit of student success (Murry & Holt, 2014). Students who are able to develop strong relationships with caring adults are less likely to have any negative behaviors such as truancy or poor grades (Zolksoski et al., 2016). Students that are able to make, develop, and maintain a connection with at least one caring adult are more willing to invest in their own academic and personal outcomes (Edgar-Smith, 2015). Positive relationships are invaluable in the success of the student.

### *Types of Alternative Schools*

Raywid (1994) categorized alternative schools into one of three types based on the goals and programming of the school: Type I, Type II, and Type III.

- Type I schools offer full-time, multiyear, education options for students of all kinds. These can be identified as popular innovations schools that seek to make school challenging and fulfilling for all stakeholders. Type I schools are schools of choice, where families elect to attend, with models that range from magnet schools to charter schools to drop-out recovery programs. These schools emphasize a curricular focus or instructional strategy.

- Type II schools are known for being schools that focus on discipline. The aim of these schools is to contain, segregate, and reform disruptive students based on a short-

term placement. Students and families do not typically choose to attend this school, however, are forced to do generally for a specific time period. These schools are seen as "soft jails" and generally include in-school suspensions.

- Type III schools focus on providing short-term and therapeutic settings for students that have academic and behavior barriers to learning due to social and emotional problems. Students at these schools have access to counseling, social services, and academic remediation. Type III schools are similar to Type I schools in that students can choose to participate (Aron, 2006; Raywid, 1994).

Both Type II and Type III set out to fix the student based on the assumption that the problems lie within the student, while Type I assumes that the difficulties may be a result of a student to school mismatch (Aron, 2006; Rayvid, 1994). Of the three types of schools, Type I focuses on allowing students and families the choice of attending a school that meets their academic needs through a specific emphasis (such as dropout recovery, occupation desire, or theme), instructional strategies, or both.

Furthermore, Type I schools can further be broken down to a variety of alternative education models that include magnet, charter, virtual, independent study, and home studies (Cable et al., 2009). These alternative models each provide a model of education that can meet the specific needs of the students and families:

- Magnet schools are designed to attract students from diverse social, economic, ethnic, and racial backgrounds by focusing on a specific subject, such as technology. These schools are centered on a particular theme or concept (U.S. Department of Education, 2007). Barr and Parrett (1997) explain that magnet schools are more common at the middle and high school level than at the elementary level. Further, in addition to the

usual high school graduation requirements required by the state, students attending magnet schools are able to connect the curriculum to real-world experiences. Students can focus on bringing English, math, history, science, et cetera to life through their area of focus, such as technology, performing arts, engineering, or the health profession as these schools are generally situated in the workplace and while studying with professionals (Barr & Parrett, 1997).

- The U.S. Department of Education (2007) defines charter schools as public schools of choice that operate with freedom from many local and state regulations that apply to traditional schools. This flexibility allows the school to be innovative, creative, and provide students with increased educational options.  Charter schools create a charter contract through a partnership of teachers, business people, nonprofit organizations, parents, and any other stakeholders involved in the education of the students to run their own school (Barr & Parrett, 1997). Charter schools have increased autonomy in return for stronger accountability.

- Virtual (online) schools, also known as distance learning, allow students to take classes digitally through the computer instead of in a school building (U.S. Department of Education, 2007). This model is sometimes utilized in remote or rural areas where specialized or advanced courses are not in the immediately available.

- Home studies, also known as self-directed learning, allow the families to prepare the materials and design their own program of study for the student (U.S. Department of Education, 2007). This was developed during the 1960s with an emphasis on the student's freedom to choose what and how they learned (Barr & Parrett, 1997).

- Independent study utilizes alternative educational strategies that respond to the individual student's needs and learning styles by providing the flexibility of either accelerating or slowing down the curriculum with the support teacher guidance. (California Department of Education, 2019)

In addition, some states have their own statutes or laws pertaining to alternative education. For example, in the State of California, state law authorizes three types of alternative schools that are geared towards high school students: continuation schools, community schools, and community day schools (Hill, 2007). According to Hill (2007), these schools are identified as:

- Continuation schools, which have existed since the 1900s, provide an alternative for students who are 16 years of age or older and need a more individualized curriculum and instruction with smaller class sizes.

- Community schools have existed since the 1970s. These schools are operated by the County Offices of Education (COE). These schools often are designed to serve and provide the education for students who have been removed or expelled from their previous school for serious offenses or for students who are involved in the juvenile law enforcement agencies.

- Community day schools have existed since the 1990s and are similar to community schools operated by the COE. The difference between community schools and community day schools is the fact that community day schools are operated by the school districts and not the COE.

Regardless of these options, alternative schools have been consistent in that they are characterized as having small enrollments and designed for students who are at-risk of dropping

out (Lehr, 2004; see Table 2). According to Lehr (2004) and Cable et al. (2009), alternative

schools, at the high school level, do the following:

- Meet a variety of needs including preventing students from dropping out

- Are accessed by the student in a variety of ways from choice to mandatory placement

- Often have criteria for enrollment

- Serve students for varying amounts of time

- Offer educational programs that typically include one or more of the following:
  individual instruction, focus on basic academic skills, social services, and community
  or work-based learning.

**Table 2**

*Types of Alternative Education Schools*

| | |
|---|---|
| Type I - schools of choice that provide a different option for students and families to meet the specific needs of the students. These schools focus on addressing potential student to school mismatches. | Examples:<br>• Magnet schools<br>• Charter schools<br>• Dropout recovery<br>• Continuation<br>• Self-directed learning<br>• Independent study |
| Type II - schools in which students were placed without a choice that focuses on discipline and addressing the issues within the student. These are typically seen as the "last-chance" option prior to expulsion. | Examples:<br>• In-school suspensions<br>• Last-chance schools<br>• Community schools<br>• Community Day schools. |
| Type III - schools of choice that focuses on serving students with behavioral and/or emotional problems with mental health needs where a traditional comprehensive school may not properly meet all the needs of the student. | Examples:<br>• Day treatment<br>• Behavioral intervention schools (BIS) |

Adapted from "Alternative Schools: The State of the Art" by M.A.
Raywid, 1994, *Educational Leadership, 52*(1), 26-31. Used with
permission (see Appendix A).

*Independent Study*

One particular approach to education that is rarely mentioned is independent study. Independent study can be defined as an "individualized alternative education designed to teach the knowledge and skills of the core curriculum" (Hill, 2007, p. 6). This approach to education is similar to self-directed learning or the continuation model as students are still required to do the same amount of work as a traditional school, to produce quality work, and meet the graduation requirements of other students in their districts except they are allowed to do so on a schedule that better meets their individual needs (Barrat & Berliner, 2009). Independent study is an approach to education in which the students are motivated by their own needs and guided by a teacher to meet their desired goals (Kolomiiets, 2018).

An independent study school creates an individualized learning plan, also known as a Master Agreement, in which the student, parents, and supervising teachers agree upon this plan as stakeholders to ensure the success of the student (Barrat & Berliner, 2009). According to Barrat and Berliner (2009) and Hill (2007) the plan details the following information:

- The learning plan specifies the courses the student will take, the learning objectives, and instructional method that the student will undergo

- It states the manner, frequency, schedule, and place for submitting assignments and reporting progress. It states the method for evaluating student work

- It has a schedule for student-teacher conferences

- It allows the students to complete assignments at any time, pace, or location that is most convenient for them

It is important to note that independent study is not recognized as a school or model, rather it is an educational approach and as a result, students are assigned to a resident school in

which the students "attend" while being considered full-time independent study students (Barrat & Berliner, 2009; Hill, 2007). As a result, many students in independent study are considered enrolled in a regular high school despite not physically attending the school.

The full-time enrollment of students in independent study schools has increased substantially. In the state of California, there were just over 80,000 students enrolled in an independent study school in 2004 and within two years it blossomed to nearly 2 million students during the 2006-2007 school year (Barrat & Berliner, 2009; Hill, 2007;). Hill (2007) states that, in California, independent study schools and continuation schools represent the largest alternative education placement. These two models represent only 4% of all alternative education schools, and yet independent study and continuation schools serve 84% of students enrolled in alternative program (Hill, 2007). With this many students enrolled in an independent study school, it is important to determine the unique characteristics of an independent study school model. Unfortunately, there is virtually no research on students who are enrolled full-time in an independent study school and whether the model exists outside of California in other states or countries (Barrat & Berliner, 2009). In addition, since independent study is considered an instructional approach rather than a school and California state law requires each school-aged student be enrolled in a school, districts will place these students in a school that they "attend" which lead to many of these students being "enrolled" in a traditional comprehensive school or a district school for state reporting purposes (Hill, 2007). This compounds the issue of data analysis because the California Department of Education's (CDE) data does not provide the opportunity for an analysis of student enrollment rates and dropout rates in an independent study school as these students are reported as attending a traditional comprehensive school or a district school (Hill, 2007).

*Student Demographics*

In the United States, the vast majority of alternative schools are designed to address the unique needs of a particular type of student (Barr & Parrett, 1997). Alternative education serves a wide range of students that come various circumstances, interests, and abilities (Lange & Sletten, 2002). These students can range from the gifted to dropouts to parenting to working to those involved in the juvenile system (Barr & Parrett, 1997). According to Lehr et al. (2008), half the states in the United States believe that alternative schools were designed to prevent students from dropping out. In a majority of the states, high school students are the target of alternative education programs, particularly those who have academic challenges, attendance issues, may drop out or have dropped out, or are parenting or pregnant (Cable et al., 2009; Porowski et al., 2014). Alternative education schools typically serve students those at-risk of dropping out or those that have been disenfranchised from the school system (Lange & Sletten, 2002).

In California, during the 2017-18 school year, there were 6,220,413 school-aged children (pre-school through 12th grade) with 2,134,728 enrolled in high school. Of the 2,134,728 high school students, 28%, or 597,724, high school-aged students were enrolled in an alternative education setting (see Figure 3). Of these high school-aged students enrolled in the alternative education setting, 48% were considered seniors, or 12th graders, by age (Warren, 2016). Furthermore, when analyzing the data of high school students, the California Department of Education (2019) reported that alternative schools serve a higher percentage of minority students, particularly Black or African American and Hispanics or Latinos, more English Language Learners, students with lower socioeconomic status, and a higher percentage of students with disabilities (see Figure 4). Alternative education schools are less diverse than

traditional schools as they have a lower ethnic diversity index with a score of 32.31, while

traditional schools have a score of 33.84 (California Department of Education, 2019). The ethnic

diversity index is on a scaled score of 0 to 100 in which the lower the number, the less diverse

the school is and the higher the number is, the more diverse the school is (see Figure 5 and Table

3).

**Figure 4**

*California Student Enrollment in Public Schools: Traditional vs. Alternative*
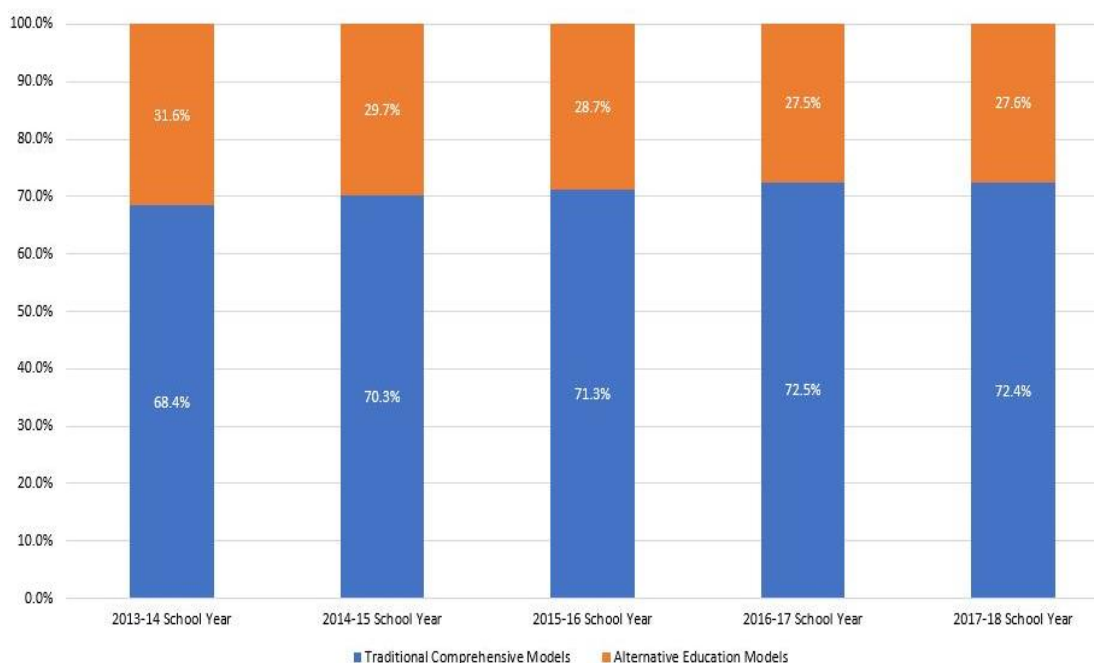


Adapted from *Enrollment by School*, by the California Department of Education (CDE), 2019
(http://www.cde.ca.gov/ds/sd/sd/filesenr.asp). In the public domain.

**Figure 5**

*Student Demographics: Traditional vs. Alternative*
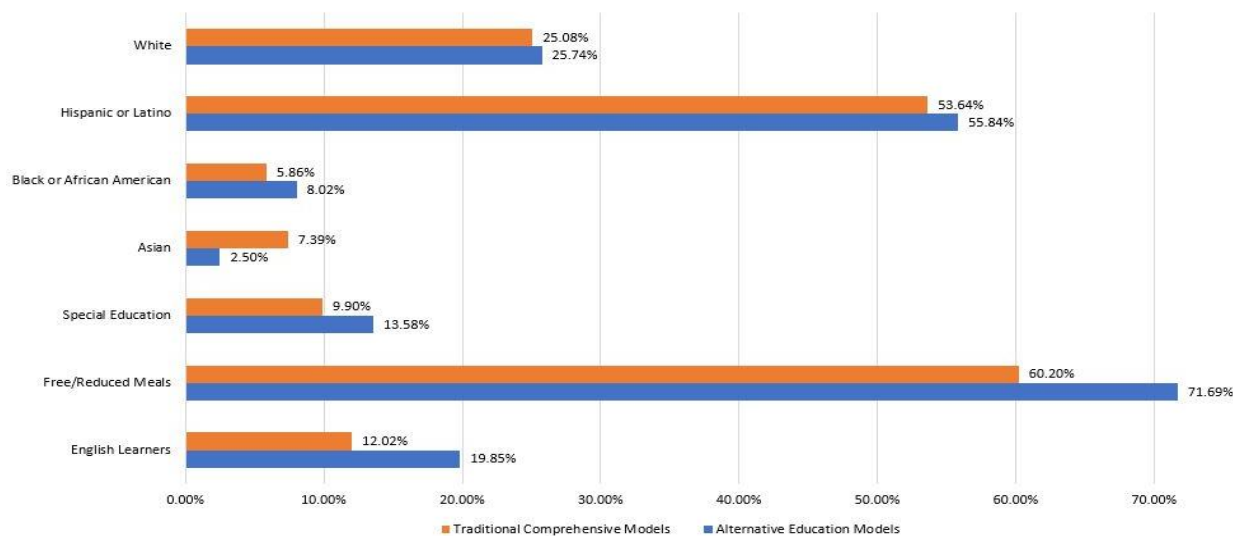


Adapted from 2018-2019 Enrollment and Student Demographic Data, by the California
Department of Education (CDE), 2019 (http://www.ed-data.org/ShareData/Html/32625). In the
public domain.

**Table 3**

*Student Enrollment by Demographics: Alternative Education vs. Traditional*

| Demographic | Alternative Education | Percentage of Students Served | Traditional Comprehensive | Percentage of Students Served |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Asian | 5258 | 2.50% | 174477 | 7.39% |
| African American | 12943 | 8.02% | 95209 | 5.86% |
| Hispanic or Latino | 82120 | 55.84% | 920586 | 53.64% |
| White | 27801 | 25.74% | 418305 | 25.08% |
| Special Education | 15749 | 13.58% | 189329 | 5.86% |
| Free/Reduced Meals | 95627 | 71.69% | 978163 | 60.20% |
| English Learners | 21912 | 19.85% | 190590 | 12.02% |

Adapted from 2018-2019 Enrollment and Student Demographic Data, by the California
Department of Education, 2019 (http://www.ed-data.org/ShareData/Html/32625). In the public
domain.

In California, during the 2016-2017 school year, the graduation rate was 82.7%
(Fensterwald, 2018). Broken down by race and other student groups, there is a large discrepancy
between minority students and their peers as the graduation rate for students in foster care was
53%, students with disabilities was 66%, English learners was 68%, African American students
was 73.1%, 80.3% for Hispanics, 87.3% for white students, and 93.1% for Asian students
(Fensterwald, 2018). In addition to the graduation rates, 15.3% of African American students,
10.4% of Hispanic students, 6.3% of white students, 3.1% of Asian students, 28.8% of foster
care youth, 12.5% of students with disabilities, and 16.9% of English Learners were dropping out
of high school (Torlakson, 2018). The graduation rates and dropout rates of students by race and
subgroups are not segregated down by schooling type by the California Department of
Education.

Although the graduation rate is not segregated by race and student subgroups by school
type, the overall graduation rate between alternative schools and traditional schools is. The
graduation rates of students enrolled in alternative schools was at 56%, which is far below the
graduation rates of traditional schools, 91.5% (Fensterwald, 2018). With 48% of the students
enrolling in an alternative education high school as a senior and credit deficient, it is unlikely
they will graduate during their senior year on time and will most likely be attending high school
for a fifth or sixth year, which impacts the graduation rate negatively, as these students are not
counted in the ACGR since they did not graduate with their four year cohort (Warren, 2016). A
majority of the students attending these alternative educational settings are students who are
credit deficient and at a greater risk of dropping out of school altogether when compared to the
students at the traditional comprehensive school (Fensterwald, 2018). Alternative education high
schools are serving students that have academic challenges, have attendance issues, may

potentially drop out of school altogether, and are minorities (Cable et al., 2009; Porowski et al., 2014). Although graduation rates are not at 100%, students are graduating and earning a high school diploma regardless of the model of schooling they are attending. These students are motivated both internally and externally to be successful (Berliner et al., 2008). These students have factors that are contributing to their success, and it is important to examine what these factors are and how they impact the students.

All individuals have various factors that influence their view on being successful. These individuals have a belief in their own skills and their abilities to be successful. Students are no different. The beliefs in oneself and in one's competencies affect the way one will behave when confronted by obstacles and challenges. How an individual determines how much energy to exert on a particular obstacle or task based on his beliefs in his abilities is known as self-efficacy.

**Self-Efficacy**

Self-efficacy is the theoretical construct that focuses on an individual's belief about his or her competencies and how these beliefs influence the way he or she behaves and/or acts (Bandura, 1997). In other words, how the individual views himself has an impact on his willingness to take on a task or challenge. Self-efficacy plays a vital role in the choices an individual makes when faced with a challenge by determining how much energy and effort the person will put into accomplishing any given task (Bandura, 1986). The higher the self-efficacy, the more likely the individual will persevere and persist through the challenge; alternatively, the likelihood the individual will take on and persist through the challenge decreases with lower self-efficacy. An additional component of self-efficacy is the ability to regulate one's level of anxiety or calmness as they engage in tasks or projects (Bandura, 1986; Cervone, 2000). The more one

believes he can control the situation, the more he can decrease the amount of stress while being willing to take on additional challenges that arise (Skinner, 1995).

Since Bandura theorized and wrote about self-efficacy and the ways to influence an individual's self-efficacy beliefs through interventions, it has evolved into a generalized theory for human behavior and expanded into other areas to determine performance success (Cervone, 2000) such as:

- The promotion of health and recovery from physical setbacks (Ewart, 1995; O'Leary, 1992)

- Educational achievement (Bandura et al., 1996)

- An individual's college major and career choice (Betz & Hackett, 1986; Lent et al., 1994).

- A person's ability to control his eating habits (Glynn & Rudderman, 1986).

- A person's performance in the work setting (Locke & Latham, 1990)

This theory postulates that individuals contribute to their own outcomes, that they can influence their own success or failures through their actions (Bandura, 1997). Individuals that undergo a task or project with a goal in mind, are monitoring their progress, and put in the work necessary to accomplish the goal are more likely to be successful than those who approach a project without a goal in mind (Bandura, 1986). By being aware of his or her own progress, the individual will be making the necessary adjustments or corrections to accomplish the task at hand (Bandura & Cervone, 1986; Cervone et al., 1991).

The individual's beliefs on his capabilities and the ability to make adjustments when presented with obstacles will lead to positive results, which in turn will strongly influence his attitude and behavior (Pajares, 1996). Schunk (1991) found that a person who felt confident and

capable in his abilities persevered and put in more effort when faced with unforeseen challenges when compared to those who doubt themselves. Individuals who believe that they will do well on a task perform better than those who think they will fail. Self-efficacy does not focus on the numerous skills and abilities the individual has, rather it focuses on how the individual utilizes these skills and abilities when presented by challenges (Bandura, 1997).

An individual's level of self-efficacy is developed over time and can increase or decrease due to the individual's successes or failures (Bandura, 1986). Self-efficacy is malleable and has four different sources that can contribute to either the increase or decline of self-efficacy levels: mastery experiences, vicarious experiences, verbal persuasion, and physiological states (Bandura, 1986).

*Sources of Self-Efficacy*

There are four main sources of self-efficacy: mastery experiences, vicarious experiences, verbal persuasion, and physiological states (Bandura, 1986). These four sources are believed to have an influence on the belief an individual has on his performance and potential success. These sources of self-efficacy can support, strengthen, and influence a person's self-beliefs, which in turn can improve his academic success (Pajares, 2003; Schunk & Pajares, 2005).

**Mastery Experiences**. According to Schunk and Usher (2012), past performance experiences are the most reliable and consistent source of self-efficacy because they provide the individual evidence of success. Bandura (1997) found that these experiences provide genuine proof that the individual can accomplish the task or challenge successfully. Further, these experiences provide the person with proof that the individual can master the goal set before him. Mastering the goal and being successful, especially when confronted with challenges that arise, have been found to be reliable sources of self-efficacy (Bandura, 1977; Dawes et al., 2000).

Mastery experiences provide the individual with authentic previous accomplishments and are the most influential source of self-efficacy (Usher & Pajares, 2006).

Success builds upon itself. The more success an individual has the more confident and more successful he believes he can be (Bandura, 1997). The higher the self-efficacy, the better they can accomplish tasks (Zimmerman & Bandura, 1994). According to Bandura (1997), individuals can improve their self-efficacy and beliefs in accomplishing tasks if given the chance to develop their abilities combined with the freedom to take risks that lead to success as a result of those abilities. The size and scope of the challenge is negligible. Successes in small projects and tasks will have the same effect as large projects (Bandura et al., 1980). The more challenges that are accomplished, the higher the individual's self-efficacy will grow. However, the opposite also holds true, unless a strong sense of self-efficacy has already been established. The more failures an individual has the lower his belief in his abilities in accomplishing tasks (Usher & Pajares, 2008).

Bandura (1989) found that the way individuals perceived their self-efficacy impacted the way they anticipated a variety of situations that may arise and how they will cope with the circumstances. Those with a strong belief in themselves and their abilities created scenarios in which they were successful, whereas those who did not believe in themselves as strongly created scenarios in which they failed (Bandura, 1989). For individuals who did not believe in themselves, their sense of self-efficacy can still increase as long as there is continued improvement, even when failure occurs (Benight & Bandura, 2004). As long as the individuals are resilient and are able to endure and recover from failures, they will be successful (Bandura et al., 1980). Bouncing back from setbacks allows the individual to understand that he can be

successful and that he can influence his outcome (Schunk & Pajares, 2005; Valentine et al., 2004).

      **Vicarious Experiences**. Self-efficacy can also be externally influenced. Bandura (1986) explains that vicarious experiences are the ways in which an individual utilizes a model as a reference point for where he or she is. Vicarious experiences provide the individual the opportunity to judge his capabilities by comparing his successes to the successes of others (Bandura, 1986). Individuals look to classmates, coworkers, or others in the same situation as a source or a model of success (Bandura, 1997). Usher and Pajares (2006) found that self-efficacy reflects the perception an individual has based on external factors. If the individual has role models being successful that they can imitate, then their self-efficacy will be higher than those without role models. Efficacy evaluations can be altered through model attainment.

      Bandura (1997) found that individuals will alter their self-efficacy based on the abilities and judgment of others; seeing others who are similar in abilities and situations be successful will increase the individual's belief in himself that he will also be successful. Rosenthal and Zimmerman (1978) found that having others to model from is a vital process in acquiring the skills, viewpoints, and behaviors. Modeling can provide coping strategies, which in turn can increase the self-efficacy for those that experience self-doubt or countless failures (Bandura, 1977). Vicarious knowledge gained from observing others in similar abilities and attributes (such as race, gender, or age) can lead to a strong foundation of self-efficacy (Usher & Pajares, 2008).

      An individual's self-efficacy is more likely to be changed based on the models he has regardless of individual setbacks or successes (Bandura, 1997). Individuals, sometimes without realizing it, are making comparative experiences daily. Vicarious experiences often occur as the individual makes comparisons with those around him such as family members, coworkers, or

classmates (Bandura, 1991; Betz & Hackett, 1981; Festinger & Hutte, 1954; Suls & Miller, 1997). Schunk (1987a) explains that individuals will develop outcome beliefs of their own actions as a result of their observations of the others in similar situations. The individual is continually comparing himself to those around him. As a result, the more the individual believes he is like those around him, the more impactful the achievements and failures of those around him will have on his own beliefs of success and failures (Bandura, 1997).

However, it is important to note that the types of role models do matter and that the role models should be like the individuals themselves. Bandura (1997) states that the more similar the model is to the individual, the more persuasive the successes or failures of the model will have on his own self-efficacy and belief on his possible successes or failures. Age, gender, and race all play a role in the individual's vicarious experience. Those between the ages of 13 and 19 are more likely to look to at a fellow teenager as a model of success or failure on a particular task or challenge then they would an elementary-age child or an adult (Caprara et al., 2011; Usher & Pajares, 2006). Gender also plays a factor in models as females will compare themselves to other females and males will compare themselves to other males (Britner & Pajares, 2006; Usher & Pajares, 2006). African American students will compare themselves to other African American students just like Caucasians will look to other Caucasians and Hispanics to other Hispanics for comparisons of successes (Usher & Pajares, 2006).

Further, models do not necessarily have to be an individual the person knows personally, with the advances in technology, the role of television, social media, blogs, or internet videos have also provided individuals with symbolic models right at their fingertips (Bandura, 1997; 2004; Hocevar et al., 2013). Bandura (1997) theorized that communication technologies allow individuals to share stories, information, and experiences with each other. These individuals can

provide modeling for others by providing the ability for others to observe attitudes, styles of competencies, and successes (Bandura, 1997). By having examples, either real or symbolic, an individual's views and beliefs in himself and his competencies can also grow (Bandura, 1982; Schunk, 1987b). When individuals see other individuals being successful, it reinforces their own confidence in engaging and overcoming obstacles.

**Verbal Persuasion**. It is important to note that self-efficacious thinking can promote and encourage the effective use of abilities; however, it must be part of a strategy that is multifaceted with the inclusion of verbal persuasion as one of the facets (Bandura, 1997). Verbal persuasions are identified as influential communication from peers, educators, or parents/guardians that assist in reinforcing or breaking down a learner's level of self-efficacy (Bandura, 1986; Hattie & Timperley, 2007). Individuals that receive realistic encouragement and praise are more likely to try harder and become successful than those who struggle with doubt (Wood & Bandura, 1989). According to Bandura (1997), it is easier for individuals to withstand challenges, especially when struggling, when influential people provide encouragement and praise. However, if the praise is perceived as trivial, it may have the opposite effect and actually lower the individual's self-efficacy (Fong & Karuse, 2014).

Capacity does not increase in an individual just by telling the individual he can do it or that he can do even more. Verbal persuasion must be authentic and appropriate for the learner in order to be effective (Bandura, 1997). Research has shown that there is a limitation of verbal persuasion that creates unrealistic expectations or focuses on capability instead of effort (Bandura, 1997; Dweck, 2000). Mueller and Dweck (1998) found that certain types of praise may actually be counterproductive to the individual's self-perception and belief of success. For example, praising individuals based on abilities may push them into a fixed mindset, whereas

praising individuals for effort may encourage them to engage in more challenging tasks (Dweck, 2006).

Dweck (2006) identified two types of abilities: fixed and growth. A fixed ability is one that isn't alterable or changeable; it is the belief that the abilities and talents are set and cannot grow. A growth mindset is one that focuses on the notion that abilities and talents can be developed through effort, learning, and persistence (Dweck, 2006). By focusing on feedback that highlights growth, an individual's self-efficacy increases (Bandura, 1997). Schunk (1983) found that feedback focused on effort and persistence raised a student's belief in himself. As a result, the student continued to persist and try, which in turn raised their level of competence.

**The Physiological States**. The last of the four sources of self-efficacy is focused on the physiological states (Bandura, 1986). The physiological states encompass how an individual reacts physically and emotionally through a variety of situations (Bandura, 1997). Individuals "read their physiological activation in stressful or taxing situations as signs of vulnerability to dysfunction" (Bandura, 1997, p. 106). Conger and Kanugo (1988) found that emotional stimulation outcomes from anxiety, depression, or stress can reduce self-efficacy expectations. If a student is anxious about a school project, he may feel that he is not capable of accomplishing the project (Usher & Pajares, 2006). Hen and Goroshit (2014) found that heightened levels of anxiety, stress, or illness could lead to an individual to procrastinating and potentially not even doing the project or assignment. On the other hand, if the student is not experiencing any adverse effects, then the student has a feeling of competence and belief he can accomplish the project (Conger & Kanugo, 1988). Individuals that have a greater ability to self-regulate their emotions have higher self-efficacy levels than those who did not (Zimmerman, 2000).

Ginsburg and Jablow (2011) have found that individuals manage their physiological states in a variety of ways and have found key differences in the way individuals manage with the challenges. When engaging in problems, people have two options: to feel more comfortable by changing the stressor or to adapt and change their behavior (Bandura et al, 1980; Ginsburg & Jablow, 2011). Those that change the stressor may procrastinate or find some distraction that allows them to distance themselves from the task altogether because it allows individuals to avoid the stress of taking on the task (Ginsburg & Jablow, 2011). Whereas, those who change their behavior and adapt to the stressor focus on the problem and cope with the challenge by addressing it directly (Ginsburg & Jablow, 2011). Individuals can avoid the stressor by switching to a different task or project or individuals can adjust to and cope with the stressor. Stress levels and coping strategies are factors that determine success (Bandura, 1997; Pajares, 2003). The better the coping strategies, the lower the stress levels.

In addition, Lodewyk and Winne (2005) found the type of assignments or projects presented to the individual can affect his or her physiological state during the process of doing the task itself. In the school setting, it is important that the assignments or projects being assigned to students have clear expectations and guidelines. Assignments that are well-designed and clearly outlined with a clear objective provide the individual with a better state of mind and focus as there is a clearly defined outcome when compared to a poorly designed task without a clear objective (Lodewyk & Winne, 2005). When assigned poorly designed tasks without clear directive or results, individuals become more stressed, upset, and frustrated in his own abilities for not being able to accomplish the task thus lowering his self-efficacy (Lodewyk & Winne, 2005). Individuals that are given a task without the proper tools and resources are more likely to be stressed, upset, and willing to give up and move onto something else.

Pintrich and Schunk (2002) found that excitement or arousal influenced efficacy.

Individuals determine actions when they experience distinctive physiological circumstances, in

which they see their enthusiasm or excitement as indicators of their own efficacy (Usher &

Pajares, 2006). High achievers viewed their excitement and arousal as an energizing factor for

taking on the challenge (Hollandsworth et al., 1979). Individuals, who are excited by a project,

whether it is work-related or school-related, are more likely to be successful on it than those who

do not (Usher & Pajares, 2006). If an assignment is dull or does not excite the individual, then he

will be less successful or possibly avoid the assignment altogether (Usher & Pajares, 2006).

Those with higher levels of self-efficacy experience less stress, higher levels of arousal, and are

more likely to accomplish goals when challenges arise (Zajacova et al.e, 2005).

### *Self-Efficacy and Academic Motivation*

According to Bandura (1977), self-efficacy is a core component in motivating behavior

as motivation determines how an individual sees the expected outcomes and goals being created

in his mind. Self-efficacy has shown to be a strong predictor of motivation (Bandura & Locke,

2003). It offers the individual motivational direction that drives determination when faced with

challenges, increases the amount of planning taken to undergo the challenges, and reinforces

self-regulation and enhances self-correction (Bandura, 2001). Valentine et al. (2004) found that

self-efficacy motivation is interconnected to the individual's performance in schooling. Those

with elevated levels of self-efficacy were more determined to succeed, which in turn, lead to an

increase in academic outcomes (DeWitz et al., 2009). Success in the academic setting is

associated with improved self-confidence, encouraged the individuals to take on ownership of

responsibilities, and increased the likelihood of completing projects (Zimmerman & Kitsantas,

2005). Gore (2006) found that successes or failures are associated with self-efficacy can predict

academic success. Individuals with low self-efficacy are have a fixed mindset on intelligence, believing that it cannot increase, and as a result are uncertain about their abilities, which is correlated with academic failings (Dweck, 2006; Komarraju & Nadler, 2003). Individuals with high self-efficacy, on the other hand, are more disciplined and more persistent regardless of challenges that may arise, which is correlated with academic success (Komarraju & Nadler, 2003). Self-efficacy beliefs are instrumental in predicting academic outcomes.

Self-efficacy is important in determining potential academic performance (Elias & MacDonald, 2007). According to Khan (2013), self-efficacy contributes to academic success. Academic self-efficacy is reflective of an individual's ability to positively accomplish educational goals (Bandura, 1997). Chemers et al. (2001) explain that academic self-efficacy is identified as the students' confidence and belief in their abilities in mastering academic subjects. The mastery of academic subjects includes all activities related to academic tasks. Mastery is important as it is related to how well students do on homework assignments, quizzes, tests, and the class overall (Chemers et al., 2001; Elias & Loomis, 2000). Chemers et al. (2001) discovered that a student's grade point average (GPA) is correlated to a student's self-efficacy; the higher the efficacy, the higher the GPA. Students with high academic self-efficacy do better overall compared to their peers with low academic self-efficacy as they are more confident in mastering the subject matter (Chemers et al., 2001). In addition, students in school with clear goals and expectations, are more likely to accomplish those goals than those who do not (Fan & Wolters, 2012).

Bandura (1997) states that those with a high level of self-efficacy are more likely to engage in challenging tasks, persevere through them, and successfully accomplish them. Self-efficacy beliefs influence the individual to embrace challenges, increase his efforts, and be

persistent throughout the challenges (Pajares, 1996). Individuals with low self-efficacy will avoid challenges and give up once the task becomes more difficult than originally anticipated (Pajares, 1996). Self-efficacy just needs to be high enough to sustain when completing the task for it to be effective (Schunk, 1991; B. Walker, 2003). Bandura (1991) states that individuals with high self-efficacy see challenges and obstacles as manageable and can be overcome, which leads them to increase their efforts to accomplish the task instead of being discouraged and quitting. Self-efficacy will intrinsically motivate individuals to push through and complete the tasks (D. Johnson, 2006). Further, according to Fan and Wolters (2012), students with a clear goal and expectation of obtaining a high school diploma were more likely to do so than those who did not.

### *Self-Efficacy and Dropping Out*

Adolescents are at risk of dropping out of school due to a variety of predictors from educational performance to behaviors to attitudes to their own backgrounds (Rumberger & Lim, 2008). Adolescents that are performing poorly in school, are disengaged and do not feel connected to the school, have poor attitudes about school, or have low socioeconomic status are more likely to drop out of schooling than their peers who perform well in school, are engaged, have positive attitudes from school, or come from high socioeconomic status (Rumberger & Lim, 2008). The higher the self-efficacy, the more likely the student will do well in school, feel connected and engaged at school, and value school despite their backgrounds (Bandura, 1986; Chemers et al., 2001; Fan & Wolters, 2012). While, on the other hand, Bandura (1997) found that those with low self-efficacy were more likely to be engaged in negative behaviors. Students that have low self-efficacy are more likely to skip school leading to absenteeism, repeated suspension from schools, lack of positive relationships, and a social network of negative

influences; all factors in predicting a high school dropout (DePaoli et al., 2017; Rumberger & Lim, 2008).

However, dropout prevention is possible both internally and externally. Internally, when the individual has self-control, has high self-esteem, have developed goals, and have developed a strong sense of self-efficacy then they are more likely to be engaged in school and have a higher willingness to overcome any obstacles or barriers set forth in front of them (Christle & Yell, 2008). Externally, individuals with strong relationships with their families, community, and school are less likely to engage in high-risk behaviors. Students with a strong sense of belonging and are engaged in caring relationships demonstrate the grit necessary to persevere through hardships and continue to work towards success (Christle & Yell, 2008). The more positively engaged the adolescent is at home, in his community, and at school, the higher his self-efficacy, which in turn decreases the probability of him dropping out of school. Although students drop out, there are those that return. Self-efficacy can provide an understanding as to how dropouts rely on self-efficacy to return to school.

**Framework**

The research behind the theory of self-efficacy provides the framework for this study into young adults that return to school after having already dropped out. Self-efficacy refers to the belief or confidence the individual has in his abilities when presented with a task or assignment (Bandura, 1986). Self-efficacy is a generative capability in which cognitive, social, emotional, and behavioral skill sets must be organized and effectively utilized when confronted by tasks or assignments (Bandura, 1986). Self-efficacy is not determined by the number of skills or abilities the individual has, rather it is focused on what the individual believes will occur when confronted with a variety of obstacles (Bandura, 1986). The strength in the individual's

conviction in his own effectiveness will determine whether they will even attempt to cope with the situation or avoid it altogether (Bandura, 1977).

Self-efficacy strengthens an individual's effort, the ability to manage with stressors, and the level of determination when faced with challenges (Bandura, 1977; 1986). Efficacy beliefs function as a vital component of an individual's competence (Bandura, 1986). As a result, people with similar skill sets may perform poorly, adequately, or exceptionally depending on their beliefs of personal efficacy (Bandura, 1986). Schunk and Pajares (2005) state that individuals with higher self-efficacy are more likely to maintain extensive effort, continually reevaluate their growth, and monitor their results. Self-efficacy is malleable. Self-efficacy beliefs are developed from four sources: mastery experiences, vicarious experiences, verbal persuasion, and physiological state (Bandura, 1986; Pajares, 2003; Schunk & Pajares, 2005).

**Mastery Experiences**. Schunk and Pajares (2006) state that mastery experiences are the most influential source of self-efficacy. Mastery experiences provide the individual with a primary source of efficacy information by proving to the individual that he can accomplish the task or challenge successfully (Bandura, 1997). Zimmerman and Bandura (1994) found that success builds upon itself and that the more successes the individual has, the more opportunities for mastery, the higher the self-efficacy. Mastery can increase an individual's self-efficacy regardless of age, gender, race, and skill level (Huang, 2013; Korkmaz et al., 2018; Tasdemir, 2019; Usher et al., 2019; Usher & Pajares, 2006).

**Vicarious Experiences**. Self-efficacy can be influenced externally as individuals look to classmates, coworkers, and others in the same situation as a source or model of success (Bandura, 1997). Vicarious experiences can be gained from observing others in similar abilities and attributes (race, gender, or age) which can lead to a strong foundation of self-efficacy (Usher

& Pajares, 2008). Bandura (1997) found that individuals will alter their self-efficacy based on the abilities and judgment of others; seeing others who are similar in abilities and situations be successful will increase the individual's belief in himself that he will also be successful.

**Verbal Persuasion**. Verbal persuasions are identified as influential communication from self, peers, or parents/guardians that assist in reinforcing or breakdown an individual's self-efficacy (Bandura, 1986; Hattie & Timperley, 2007). Truthful self-affirmation and confirmation from others can help improve and grow an individual's self-efficacy (Bandura, 1997). At the same time, if the confirmation or affirmations are inauthentic, it can lower the individual's belief in himself and his success (Fong & Karuse, 2014).

**Physiological States**. The higher the self-efficacy, the more likely the individual can self-regulate their emotions and their anxiety than those who do not (Zimmerman, 2000). Heightened levels of anxiety, stress, or illness can lead an individual to doubting their capabilities (Hen & Goroshit, 2014). Stress levels and coping strategies are factors that determine self-efficacy levels (Bandura, 1997; Pajares, 2003). The better the coping strategies; the lower the stress levels and the higher the self-efficacy.

According to Bandura (1997), self-efficacy is the theory that an individual's self-belief on his competencies and efforts will influence the way he behaves, or acts, based on the task at hand. Self-efficacy is pliable and can be altered based on past successes or disappointments (Bandura, 1986; Schunk, 1991). Individuals that have been successful are more likely to engage in tasks or challenges than those that have not. There are four ways that self-efficacy can be influenced: mastery experiences, vicarious experiences, verbal persuasions, and physiological state. Self-efficacy is malleable and may increase due to a shift in the mindset of the individual or due to some unforeseen circumstances that forces the individual to increase their belief in their

own abilities. In education, those who become a dropout and decide to re-enroll to earn a high school diploma are known as a re-engaged youth (Berliner et al., 2008).

**Re-Engaged Youth**

While there is extensive research and literature focused on the dropout problem and policies implemented to prevent students from dropping out, there is a lack of information regarding the characteristics of students who drop out and then re-engage (Berliner et al., 2008). There is virtually no national or statewide accounting of how many students return after dropping out, the descriptions of their demographic characteristics and academic process, or even the documentation of their high school outcomes (Barrat & Berliner, 2016). In one urban school district, 35% of the students dropped out during high school, of which 31% ended up re-enrolling with 18.4% of these re-engaged students graduating with a high school diploma (Berliner et al., 2008). Many educators, such as principals, teachers, coaches, and counselors are willing to engage and pull the dropouts back into school while also providing additional academic assistance so that these re-engaged youth can be successful (Berliner et al., 2008). Despite the additional support, approximately 80% of these re-engaged youth will not graduate with their class, on time, as they are credit deficient and there is a lack of credit recovery interventions for these students at the traditional high schools (Barrat & Berliner, 2016; Berliner at al., 2008). However, an emerging body of research has revealed that dropping out of school does not have to be a permanent outcome, that some students that dropout and return, do go on to graduate (Barrat & Berliner, 2016). Research has revealed that students who return and graduate are motivated and driven both internally and externally to be successful (Berliner et al., 2008).

Yet, despite this emerging body of research, there is lack of research that examine the voices of former students who dropped out of school, re-enrolled, and went on to earn a high

school diploma. Also, there is no research that examines former students that opt to re-enroll in an alternative school setting, specifically independent study, to earn a high school diploma, and the factors that motivated or encouraged them to re-engage in their education. The current body of research does not examine how self-efficacy influenced these former students to re-engage and go on to earn a high school diploma.

**Summary**

Within the last decade, there have been only two studies conducted on the independent study model, of which both examined the type of students enrolled, the trends, and if these schools served a specific demographic (Barrat & Berliner, 2009; Hill, 2007). Neither study allowed the students' stories to be told or their voices to be heard. Thus, the purpose of this study was to (a) examine the voices of former students that dropped out and then decided to re-enroll into an independent study high school to earn their diploma and (b) understand how the role self-efficacy contributed to them re-enrolling, completing their high school requirements, and earning a high school diploma.

This chapter analyzed the literature review surrounding the term dropout, the various types of alternative educational models, the way alternative educational models are designed on the notion that one size does not fit all, and the impact self-efficacy has on a student's academic success. The literature review aims to provide an understanding of what factors contribute to an individual dropping out of high school, and how alternative education can have a role in providing a student the opportunity to obtain a high school diploma. The literature review indicates that four sources of self-efficacy (mastery experiences, verbal persuasion, vicarious experiences, and physiological states) may contribute to an individual's academic success. Through the examination of the literature, it is revealed that alternative education provides the

ability to serve re-engaged youth as they earn their high school diploma, and as a result, can positively impact the student's own belief in their self-efficacy. As there is little to no research conducted on independent study and the impact it has on students, the purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study was to describe the experiences of students enrolling and electing an alternative educational model, independent study, as a means for obtaining their high school diploma.

**Chapter 3: Methodology**

In Chapter 1, the critical need for research on the alternative educational model of independent study was established. The need to document, describe, and analyze former students that attended an independent study school was highlighted as an alternative means of obtaining a high school diploma. In Chapter 2, the literature on dropouts, alternative education, and self-efficacy was reviewed. The literature established that alternative education, such as the independent study model, may provide opportunities for students to obtain a high school diploma that a traditional comprehensive school may not. Further, Chapter 2 also established a theoretical framework through the theory of self-efficacy. Self-efficacy provided the lens to determine how the mastery experiences, verbal persuasion, vicarious experiences, and physiological state affected the former students through their high school career as they dropped out, re-enrolled in an independent study high school, and go on to earn a high school diploma.

This chapter describes the research design and the methodological approach that was utilized to explore the educational experiences of former students who dropped out of high school, re-enrolled into an independent study high school, and earned a high school diploma. In addition, this chapter includes the details about the qualitative methodology utilized in this study: interpretative phenomenological analysis. The role of the researcher, the selection of the participants, and the participants are described in the research design. It also explains how data were collected, maintained and managed, and analyzed.

**Research Design**

This qualitative study utilized an interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) to explore the stories of former students who opted to attend an independent study high school to obtain their high school diploma. The researcher gathered information through a Generalized

Self-Efficacy questionnaire, research memos, and an interview protocol. The researcher interviewed former students from two different independent study high schools. There were 14 participants in this study. Additionally, at least three participants came from each school. As a result of this criterion, at minimum, one site provided only three participants and the other provided 11. The interviews were conducted via Zoom or Skype using a semi-structured interview protocol. The questions utilized were designed to explore the lived experiences of high school dropouts that re-enrolled into an independent study high school and earned a high school diploma through a self-efficacy lens.

Qualitative research is utilized to investigate and increase the knowledge of a problem (Creswell, 2013). The goal of qualitative methods, when there is limited information available, is seek to understand the phenomenon (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Lunenburg and Irby (2008) explain that qualitative research requires the analysis of patterns and meanings that appear from the data. Creswell (2013) states that qualitative research should explore the theoretical frameworks first, which will then inform the study and address the implication that attribute to social or human issues. Qualitative research allows the voices of the participants to be heard and shared (Creswell, 2013).

Additionally, a qualitative method is used to empower individuals to share their experiences (Creswell, 2013; Vijeila, 2019). By allowing the voices of the participants to be heard and shared, this study explored the participants' stories through the lens of self-efficacy and sought to have an understanding of what motivated or drove the participants to select an independent study high school to obtain their high school diploma. Because the purpose of this study was to explore the lived experiences of these young adults, the qualitative research model chosen was phenomenology. Phenomenology is an approach to the study of experiences (Smith

et al., 2009). Moustakas (1994) states that the phenomenological approach allows the individual to have the opportunity for reflection and to share the experience of the lived experience. Through the phenomenological approach, the lived experiences as individuals reflect and recount their experience of the phenomena can be documented (Creswell, 2013). It is important to obtain rich data by allowing the individuals the chance to tell their stories freely in a manner that allows them to express their ideas and viewpoints (J. Smith et al., 2009). Specifically, the researcher was interested in examining and interpreting how these former students made sense of their own experiences from dropping out of school to re-enrolling in an independent study high school to graduating with a high school diploma. According to Pietkiewicz and Smith (2014), there is no phenomenon that cannot be interpreted. As a result, this study utilized interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) as its methodology.

IPA is a qualitative approach aimed at exploring in detail how people make sense of major experiences in their lives (J. Smith et al., 2009). IPA is focused on the detailed examination of the lived experiences with the goal of allowing the experience to be expressed in its own terms, rather than a predefined category system (J. Smith et al, 2009). Smith et al. (2009) state that IPA is committed to understanding how a specific phenomenon has been understood from the perspective of particular people in a particular context. IPA is "committed to the examination of how people make sense of their major life experiences (J. Smith et al., 2009, p. 1). IPA research seeks to understand what the participant experienced while also standing alongside the participant as they recount their phenomena.

In addition, IPA relies on hermeneutic insights. Hermeneutics is the theory that focuses on the interpretation of what is written or said (J. Smith et al., 2009). Smith et al. (2009) explain that IPA always involves interpretation: as the researcher makes sense of, or interprets, the

phenomena the participant experienced while the participant makes sense of or interpreting his own experience of the phenomena. As a result, IPA relies on double hermeneutics (J. Smith & Osborn, 2003). For this research, the researcher attempted to comprehend the participants and their experiences as they make sense of their own experiences of dropping out and enrolling in an independent study high school to earn a high school diploma. IPA is underpinned by the theory which looks at both phenomenology, where a person's subjective experience of a particular phenomenon is examined, and heuristics which looks at how people understand and make sense of their own experiences (J. Smith et al., 2009).

The IPA methodology provides the researcher with insight into the lived experience of particular phenomenon from the point of view of the participants (Treweek et al., 2019). Treweek et al. (2019) utilized the IPA methodology to examine the perspective of individuals with autism and their viewpoints on stereotypes of individuals with autism by society. Treweek et al. (2019) found that individuals with autism had a range of perspectives on how stereotypes affected them, however, the individuals all believed that the stereotypes made them feel less than human. By allowing the participants to have a voice and have their stories told, the researchers found that negative attitudes towards individuals with autism can lead to negative behaviors if left unchallenged and that the participants did not believe that they were any different than those without autism (Treweek et al., 2019). The researchers interpreted the experiences of the individuals experiencing the phenomenon and found themes that helped them conclude that the stereotypes affected the individuals negatively.

Similarly, Tomlinson and Hewitt (2018) explored the experiences of adult participants with mild intellectual disabilities who self-identified as having mental health problems utilizing the IPA method. In this study, the researchers interviewed eight participants and allowed for

these participants to utilize their voices and experiences in how these individuals deal with their mental health problems (Tomlinson & Hewitt, 2018). The researchers found four themes from the study that emerged and provide examples of how mental health professionals and psychological interventions could be utilized to support individuals with mild intellectual disabilities and mental health problems (Tomlinson & Hewitt, 2018).

Bright et al. (2017) utilized the IPA methodology to explore the experiences that families of people with intellectual disabilities when raising concerns with their health care services. In the study, the researchers utilized a semi-structured interview, interpreted the results, and found themes that were consistent with the participants. The researchers concluded that it is important to simplify the process of raising concerns, attend to the relationship with the families, and ensure that advocacy services are provided for those without a family (Bright et al., 2017).

Thackeray and Eatough (2016) were able to explore the paternal experiences of parenting a young adult with a developmental disability utilizing the IPA method. In this study, the researcher utilized semi-structured interviews which were then subjected to the IPA methodology to help lend a voice to the participants (Thackeray & Eatough, 2016). The researchers found four themes based on the interpretation of the experiences of fathers and provided a voice for these fathers as they face the societal conceptions of masculinity, fatherhood, and the experiences of being a father of an individual with a disability (Thackeray & Eatough, 2016).

Additionally, Alase (2017) utilized the IPA methodology when investigating the Common Core States Standards (CCSS) and the impact these standards had on educators in the state of South Dakota. This research utilized a semi-structured interview and interviewed individuals that have experienced the phenomenon. The study found three key themes about the

experiences of these educators regarding CCSS: optimism, training, and buy-in from the stakeholders (Alase, 2017). Through the interpretation of the experiences, the researcher found that CCSS can be successful as long as the educational staff were optimistic, given training, and had bought in. The study allowed for the participants' experiences of implementing CCSS to be heard.

Thus, IPA was best suited for this dissertation research study. IPA provides the opportunity for the individuals experiencing the phenomenon to provide personal accounts of their lived experiences while trying to complete a high school degree. IPA invites the "participants to a rich, detailed, first-person account of their experiences" (J. Smith et al., 2009, p. 56). IPA allows the participants to be "granted the opportunity to tell their stories, to speak freely and reflectively, and to develop their ideas and express their concerns" about the phenomena (J. Smith et al, 2009, p. 56). As there is limited research on independent study high schools, the sampling method in obtaining participants will be purposeful to gather individuals that have experienced this phenomenon.

The following questions guided this research:

- What factors led high school dropouts to return to high school?
- What factors led a re-engaged youth to stay in school and graduate?
- What does an independent study high school provide re-engaged youths?

**Sources of Data**

The sampling method in this qualitative study was purposeful sampling instead of a common sampling; more specifically was a criterion sampling.  A common sampling, which is used in quantitative research, is utilized to "reflect the proportional distribution of relevant population characteristics" (Boeije, 2010, p. 35).  Seeing as this study was focused on a specific

population of individuals, and not the general population, common sampling would not work. Smith et al. (2009) explain that with IPA's orientation, samples need to be selected purposefully because they provide insight to a specific experience. In this study, the sampling obtained was a purposeful sampling since "the cases selected can teach us a lot about the issues that are of importance to the research" (Boeije, 2010, p. 35). The participants in this study came from a roster of former students provided by the superintendent of the independent study high schools.

Further, to answer the research question and to gain a better perspective of the variety of students who attended an independent study high school, a criterion was utilized. The criterion allowed the study to narrow the focus on a group of participants that meet a list of criteria (Gay et al., 2009). In addition, Creswell (2013) states that it is important that the participants selected have experienced the phenomenon being studied. As a result, the participants needed to meet the following criteria:

- Be at least 18 years of age

- Dropped out of high school before enrolling in an independent study high school program.

- Attended Independent Study High School 1 or Independent Study High School 2

- Graduated from Independent Study High School 1 or Independent Study High School 2 within the past five years.

- Selected to attend an independent study program by choice, and not because they were expelled or referred to the independent study school by their local high school.

- Was not a former student of the researcher.

This study explored the participants' experiences through the lens of self-efficacy to understand and learn what influenced their desires to enroll in an independent study high school

to earn a high school diploma after initially dropping out of high school. This research looked to have at minimum 12 to no more than 19 participants, with a minimum of four participants from each school.  It is important to have a smaller sample size in qualitative research (Creswell, 2013). Due to the complexity of the human phenomena, IPA studies focus on quality and not quantity and benefits from a small sample size (J. Smith et al, 2009).

**Research Sites**

This study was conducted at Independent Study High School 1 (ISHS 1) and Independent Study High School 2 (ISHS 2). ISHS 1 and ISHS 2 are both operated by a charter management organization (CMO) known as Independent Study Union (ISU). A CMO is an educational organization that operates charter schools within the United States. ISU operates over 90 charter schools within the United States with the bulk of the schools, 80, operating in the state of California. ISHS 1 and ISHS 2 are six miles apart from one another and serve students within a 20-mile radius of an urban area located in California. Both schools serve high school students between the ages of 14 to 24. Students are referred to the ISHS 1 or ISHS 2 by their counselors, probation officers, or social service agencies. The school has continuous open enrollment, meaning students can enroll at any time throughout the calendar year. The schools operate year-round only closing for major holidays, two weeks for winter recess, one week in November, and one week for spring break to provide students the opportunity to make up credits.

At the ISHS 1 site, the school operates in an office building utilizing 15,000 square feet of space for its instruction. Approximately 3,000 square feet dedicated to an open floor model of instruction. The 3,000 square feet space is known as the main floor in which the teachers are stationed near the edge and the student desks are in the center. Further, the main floor is encompassed by one conference room, six small group instruction classrooms, one library, and

five offices, with one being the principal's office (see Figure 6). There are eight independent

study teachers, three small group instruction teachers, three tutors, eight classified staff, one

counselor, and two administrators on site. Students are expected to meet with their independent

study teacher for approximately 90 minutes twice a week and utilize other support staff such as

the tutors for additional support in addition to the one on one from the teacher. ISHS 1 operates

from 8:00 am to 4:30 pm Monday through Friday, with Friday being a pupil free day for staff

professional development.

**Figure 6**

*Layout of ISHS 1*
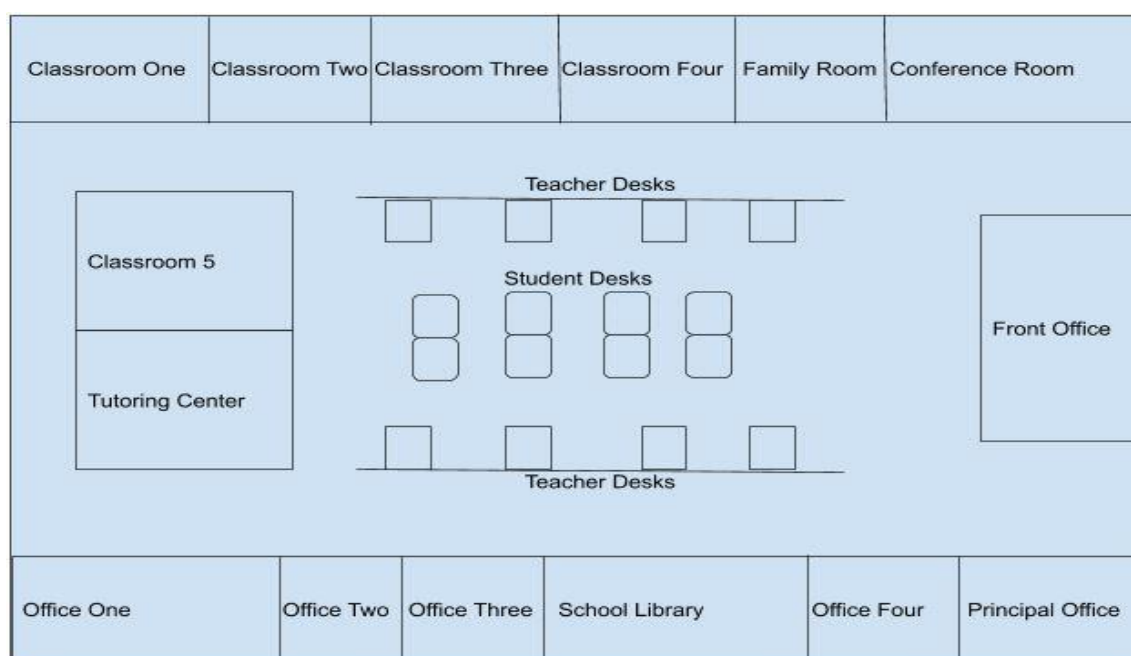


In addition, the city that ISHS 1 serves has a population of 109,673 with 42% of the

population being African American and 49.9% Hispanic or Latino (U.S. Census Bureau, 2019).

According to the U.S. Census Bureau (2019), the median income of this community is $50,335.

Further, of the individuals 25 years or older, only 75.7% have a high school diploma, with 20.5%

having a bachelor's degree or higher (U.S. Census Bureau, 2019). The school is reflective of the

community it serves where 55% of the students at ISHS 1 are African American and

40% are Hispanic or Latino. The rest of the student population is interspersed between White,

Asian, Pacific Islanders, and other. Furthermore, 33% of the students served are between the

ages of 18 to 24.

The ISHS 2 site is co-located within a church approximately 10 miles north of ISHS 1.

This school operates on the second floor of the annex to the church utilizing approximately 4,000

square feet for instruction. There is one front office, three classrooms, one conference room, and

one administrator office (see Figure 7). The school has two Small Group Instruction teachers, six

independent study teachers, two tutors, a counselor on campus three times a week, and one

administrator. Two of the classrooms are in an open floor model where three teachers are located

within each classroom and serving approximately 18 students every 90 minutes. The third

classroom is utilized for small group instruction for math and literacy. Similar to ISHS 1, the

students at ISHS 2 are expected to meet with their independent study teacher for approximately

90 minutes twice a week. The school operates from 8:00 am to 4:30 pm Monday through Friday,

with Friday being a pupil free day for staff professional development.

**Figure 7**

*Layout of ISHS 2*
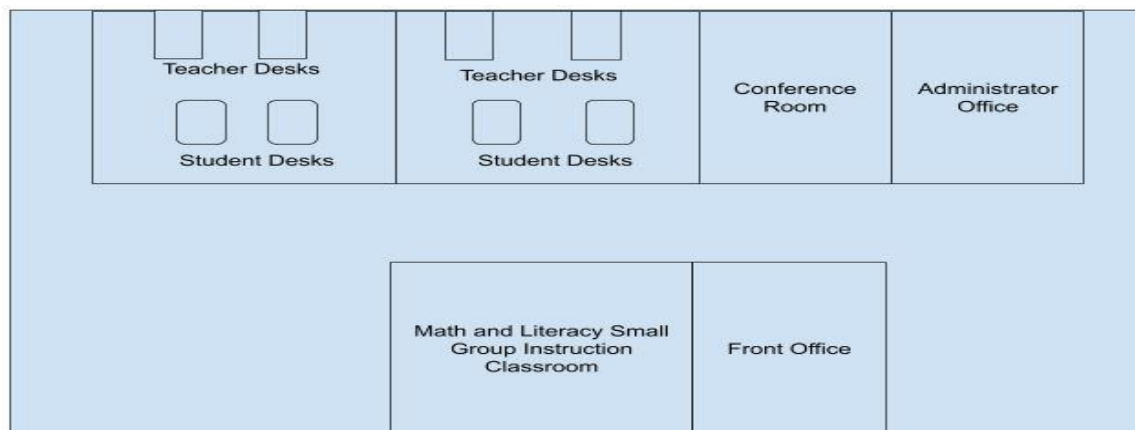
Although ISHS 2 is only six miles away from ISHS 1, it serves a different community. ISHS 2 resides in a larger city than that of ISHS 1 in which the population is 3,792,621 and the median household income is $58,385 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2019). According to the U.S. Census Bureau (2019), 52.4% of this population is White, 48.6% is Hispanic or Latino, and 8.9% are African American. Additionally, 77% of individuals 25 years or older hold a high school diploma, with 33.7% having a bachelor's degree or higher (U.S. Census Bureau, 2019). Even though this community is predominantly white, ISHS 2 is not reflective of the community. ISHS 2 serves a higher minority student population where 50.5% of the students are African American, 34% Hispanic or Latino, and 0.5% white. Further, similar ISHS 1, 33% of the student population is between the ages of 18 to 24. Appendix B shows the recruitment script that will be used for this study; Appendix C contains the Informed Consent Form.

**Data Collection Instruments**

This study utilized a semi-structured interview in which the questions were utilized to guide the research, but ultimately, the participants were the ones setting the parameters of the topic. A semi-structured interview allows the researcher and participant to engage in an actual conversation and still provide the freedom and flexibility to further investigate and obtain more details (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014).

In developing the interview protocol, the researcher kept in mind four factors in regards to the study's participants: (a) demographics, (b) what led the individual to drop out of high school, (c) what led to the individual re-enrolling into an independent study high school, and (d) what factors contributed to the student remaining re-engaged and ultimately earning a high school diploma from an independent study high school. The interview protocol consisted of a 30 questions semi-structured interview. Eight of these questions were regarding demographics. 19

of the questions were aligned to the research questions, as well as, how the role of self-efficacy

impacted the former student's decision to drop out of school, enroll into an independent study

high school, and remain re-engaged in their education as they earned a high school diploma.

Three of the questions were possible follow-up questions designed to gather more insight of the

former students.

The interview protocol utilized the interview protocol refinement framework (IPRF) to

ensure that the interview questions aligned with the research questions, created an inquiry-based

conversation, had the protocol reviewed by others, and had a pilot conducted (Castillo-Montoya,

2016). Castillo-Montoya (2016) states that the interview questions need to align with the

research questions and the researcher needs to determine whether there are too many questions or

not enough questions being asked to ensure that the research questions are being answered. In

addition, it is important to create and develop an interview protocol that allows for a exchange

between the researcher and participant so that it is rigid enough to keep the participant from

veering away from answering the interview questions, while also allowing enough flexibility so

that the researcher can probe for more information (Castillo-Montoya, 2016). Once the questions

have been developed, it is important to have the interview protocol be reviewed by others to

establish how well participants understand the questions and whether their understanding is close

to what the researcher intended the questions to mean (Castillo-Montoya, 2016). Finally,

Castillo-Montoya (2016) states that it is important to pilot the interview protocol with a small

group of individuals first as a way to simulate an actual interview and determine whether the

interview protocol needs further refinement for clarity, simplicity, and answerability.

A pilot study was utilized to field test the semi-structured interview questions (see

Appendix D) used in the research study. The pilot study was conducted at least four weeks in

advance prior to the start of the study to test the questions and allow the researcher to gather feedback on the questions. The pilot study participants were able to provide beneficial information to the researcher in establishing instruments that were appropriate for the target population and allowed for improvements as needed and where necessary.

In addition to the interview protocol, research memos and a Generalized Self-Efficacy (GSE) questionnaire were also utilized. The GSE questionnaire provided a snapshot of the participants and their views on their own abilities and beliefs when presented with obstacles or challenges. The questionnaire that was utilized for this study is a modified version of the Generalized Self-Efficacy Scale (see Appendix E). The GSE measures an individual's belief in his or her own abilities when confronted by challenges or obstacles (Schwarzer & Jerusalem, 1995). For this study, the GSE questionnaire (see Appendix E) asked two questions regarding name and contact information for possible follow up and six questions regarding self-efficacy. The purpose of the GSE questionnaire is to build a profile of the participant and to come to understand the participant's beliefs in his or her abilities when confronted by a challenge or obstacle. See Appendix F for the permission to use the Generalized Self-Efficacy Scale.

Further, four of the 19 questions in the interview protocol were adopted from the Generalized Self-Efficacy Scale. These questions were added to the interview protocol as they assisted in answering the research questions. Further, this also allowed the participants the opportunity to go more in-depth in their response, than they would be able to through a online questionnaire.

Research memos were also developed and used to provide as much detail and data as possible before the interview protocol, during the interview protocol, and after the interview protocol as the transcripts were coded. Research memos serve to assist the researcher in making

concept leaps from raw data to those abstractions that can explain research phenomena in the context in which it was examined (Birks et al., 2008). Memos are not restricted to just the analytical phase of research, rather it can be utilized to clarify thinking on a research topic, provide a mechanism for the articulation of assumptions and subjective perspectives about the area of research, or assist in facilitating the development of the study design (Birks et al., 2008). The researcher took memos before, during, and after the interviews were conducted to provide as much detail and data as possible. In addition, memos were created as the interviews were transcribed and coded to provide more insight regarding the experiences of the participants as they dropped out, re-enrolled, and ultimately earned a high school diploma.

To ensure that the researcher was able to secure participants to be part of this study, an incentive was raffled off to participants who completed the GSE questionnaire and another incentive was raffled off to the participants who participated in the interview protocol. The incentives for the GSE questionnaire and the interview protocol were a $25 Amazon gift card. There was one Amazon gift card that was randomly selected for participants that fully completed the GSE questionnaire. All participants that fully completed the GSE questionnaire were assigned a code. Before interview protocol started, the codes were placed in a random picker generator. The random picker generator then randomly picked the winner of the Amazon gift card. The winner received the gift card by e-mail.

Additionally, there was a second Amazon gift card that was randomly selected for participants that participated in the interview. These individuals were assigned a code. At the completion of the data analysis, these codes were placed in a random picker generator. The random picker generator then randomly picked the winner of the Amazon gift card. The winner received the gift card by e-mail. In total, there were two $25 Amazon gift cards that were raffled

off; one for those participating in the GSE questionnaire and one for those participating in the interview protocol. Aside from this, no additional incentives were offered, and the participants were reminded periodically that their participation was voluntary.

**Data Collection Procedures**

For this study, the interview protocol, research memos, and GSE questionnaire was utilized as sources of data. Interviews provided an opportunity for the researcher to learn about social life through the perspective, experience, and language living it (Boejie, 2010). Interviews allowed the participants to provide detailed and rich information from a firsthand experience (Boejie, 2010). Moustakas (1994) also details the importance of compiling the what and how in describing the role of the researcher in data collection from those who have experienced the phenomenon to develop an account of the experience. It was important for the field notes to be descriptive and reflective as this further enhanced the transcripts of the interviews (Creswell, 2013). The interviews done digitally through Skype or Zoom, had the sessions recorded. All digital files are kept secured on a personal computer in a locked and secured location that only the research has a key to. After three years following the conclusion of research study, the data will be destroyed.

The following steps were utilized to collect the interview data that would de-identify participants from their identities:

- Potential participants were referred by the superintendent of ISHS 1 and ISHS 2 were contacted by a recruitment e-mail (see Appendix B) to determine their willingness to participate in the study.

- The participants that wished to participate in the study were sent a consent form (see Appendix C).

- Once the consent form was signed and sent back to the researcher, participants were then be asked to complete the GSE questionnaire, through Qualtrics, to respond to which provided a snapshot of the participant. From there, selected participants were invited to the interview protocol.

- Once the participants were chosen, a letter detailing the research study and a request for the date, time, and place for the interview was be sent via e-mail.

- Before the interview began, the researcher went over the consent form with the participant. The researcher stated that participation was voluntary and that the participant could opt-out at any time.

- During the interviews, the participants were requested to share their perceptions about their experiences of dropping out and eventually earning a high school diploma utilizing the interview protocol.

- The interviews were conversational and informal.

- Follow-up interviews were conducted as needed.

The primary data collected for this study were the interviews. Maxwell (2013) states that in qualitative research, a hypothesis is typically created after the researcher has already begun the study; the researcher needs to be grounded in the data and the hypothesis are developed and tested in the interactions with the data rather than being ideas that are simply tested against the data. Qualitative research promotes an inductive approach to the collection of data and analysis, as a result, it rejects formulating a hypothesis prior to conducting the research (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014). Interviews were conducted with the intention that the researcher did not impose his own understanding of the participant's phenomenon (J. Smith et al., 2009). In addition, Smith et al. (2009) explain that interview schedules will need to be respectful of the participant's time and

need to begin with general questions that are broad and permit the participants to set the parameters of the topic. The participants need to be comfortable and understand that it is their story being told.

During the research, all interview responses, notes, and recordings were kept confidential. The GSE questionnaire had all names and contact information removed. The participants' responses to the questionnaire were given a code so that any identifying information was removed. For example, a participant may receive the code ISHS 1S4. The audio recordings and the written memos were given a specific code so that any identifying information is removed. For example, a participant from one research site was identified as ISHS 1S1 and the other site was identified as ISHS 2S1. Pseudonyms were utilized to protect the identities of the participants. In addition, pseudonyms were also be used on any other identifying information such as school staff, school names, and school districts. Once interviews were completed, the interviews were then transcribed. The researcher then proofread the transcripts to ensure the accuracy of what was recorded.

However, it was important to ensure that triangulation occurs as this reduces the risk of chance associations and of systematic biases due to one specific method by allowing a better assessment of the generality of explanations that one develops (Maxwell, 2013). Triangulation refers to the examination of a phenomenon from different angles (Boeije, 2010).  Aside from the interview protocol, research memos and the GSE questionnaire were utilized in an effort to gather as much data as possible (see Figure 8).

**Figure 8**

*Triangulation of Data: Interviews, Research Memos, Questionnaires*
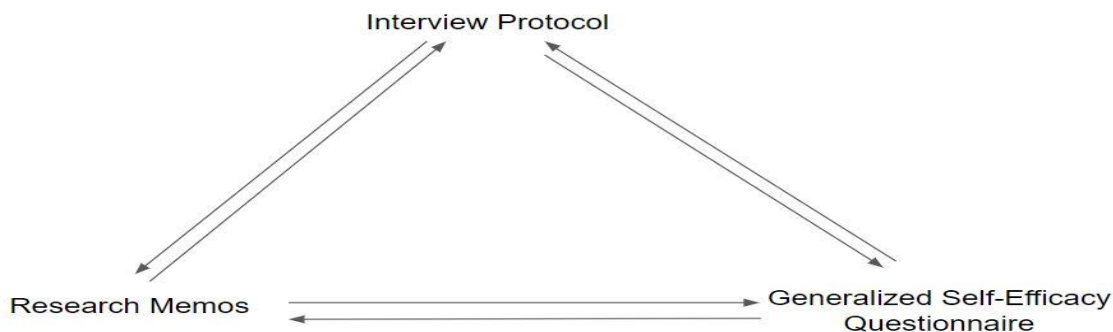


**Human Subjects Considerations**

All precautions were taken to protect the rights and welfare of human subjects in this research study. All policies and procedures followed the required Pepperdine University Graduation and Professional Institutional Review Board (IRB) procedures. All research was conducted in accordance with ethical, legal, and institutional requirements. The researcher submitted the preliminary IRB documentation and completed Pepperdine's University's online tutorial in Human Subjects Protection. The researcher applied for an exempt status based on the Summary of Exempt Category 2 criteria.  In addition, as this study utilized participants that are former students of specific schools, the researcher also submitted preliminary IRB documentation in conjunction with ISU for the Summary of Expedite Category 7 criteria. The study was only conducted after IRB permission was obtained (see Appendix G). See Appendix H for permission to use the students' data in the study.

The risks to the participants were minimal. The minimal risks the individuals were projected to have were emotional discomfort, issues with self-efficacy, boredom, and the possibility of a negative self-reflection. The participants were informed that the study was entirely voluntary and that they could opt-out for any reason and at any time. Participants were

provided a letter that detailed the purpose of the study and detailed how confidentially would be maintained. The researcher would not disclose any of the participant's identifiable personal information.

**Data Analysis**

After each interview protocol was completed, the researcher transcribed the interviews verbatim. The researcher then proofread the transcriptions of the interview and followed up with the participants for clarity or additional questions that arose out of the transcriptions. According to Smith et al. (2009), there are six steps that need to be followed when analyzing material in the IPA framework:

- Read and re-read the transcripts

- Initial noting

- Developing emergent themes

- Searching for connections across emergent themes

- Moving to the next case

- Looking for patterns across cases

In addition, Pietkiewicz and Smith (2014) recommend that reading the transcript and listening to the audio recordings numerous times allows the researcher to immerse himself in the data. Further, according to Pietkiewicz and Smith (2014), through the multiple listening and reading of the audio and transcripts, the researcher will be able to discern possible themes from the data. The transcribed data will be stored into a computer database to continue with the process of coding.

Upon completion of the transcription, the data were uploaded into HyperResearch® to maintain, control, and reconstruct the data collected. Data will be organized into codes,

frequencies, and themes that emerged from the participants' responses. Coding allows the researcher to create sorting descriptive data so that the information can be labeled based on what is important to the research (Maxwell, 2009). Through what is known as open coding, the data is aggregated into small categories of information and provided a label to the code (Creswell, 2013; Maxwell, 2009). Once the coding is completed, the researcher can then analyze the data, patterns among the interviews, and seek to answer the research questions.

**Validity**

Boeije (2010) states that validity is being specific about what one is out to assess. It is important for the researcher to look for evidence that could challenge or be potential threats to the conclusion (Maxwell, 2013). Numerous steps were taken to ensure validity. The first step were the interview questions. The interview questions were developed to allow the participants to share their stories and to allow follow-up for any clarifying questions. Trustworthiness increases with objectivity when the researcher, using semi-structured interviews, probe at significant points, thereby avoid biasing tendencies (Isaac & Michael, 1997). The interview questions were developed after the review on the literature on dropouts, alternative schools, and self-efficacy.

In addition, the piloting of the interview protocol and GSE questionnaire provided another layer of validity. The pilot allowed for an initial analysis of the steps taken to ensure the value of the questions and the validity of the results. The steps were revised based on what the results of pilot. Gall et al. (2007) explain that the merit of the procedures and steps taken in the pilot study will allow for the correction of flaws prior to conducting the study. In addition, for a pilot study, two to three participants are sufficient in a qualitative study (Gall et al., 2007).

The researcher's main strategy for addressing threats to validity was to provide documentation and detailed records of how data were collected, how and why the data were coded, and how many times the themes appeared in each of the interviews. Validity threats were addressed by trying to represent an honest interpretation of how the participants view themselves as high school graduates after dropping out.

**Positionality**

Moustakas (1994) states that being able to have a fresh perspective or viewpoint of a phenomenon is unlikely. Prior to the start of a project, it is important that the researcher addresses their own experience with the phenomenon and bracketing out their personal experiences (Creswell, 2013). By bracketing, the researcher will set aside, as much as possible, his own experiences in the phenomenon so that he can approach the phenomenon with a fresh perspective (Moustakas, 1994).

Since 2010, the researcher has worked at multiple independent study high school programs in a variety of roles: academic recovery teacher, small group instructor, and assistant principal. During this time, he has seen many students who, by definition, were labeled as high school dropouts prior to attending the independent study program, eventually graduate from high school through an independent study high school. The researcher has seen success stories as these same students who had not been successful in a traditional comprehensive high school, eventually earned a high school diploma and one even pursued a doctorate degree.

Furthermore, the researcher has had close friends who left their traditional comprehensive high school because the school was not flexible enough. These individuals went through a variety of issues: needing to work to help support the family financially, dealing with medical issues, or the pacing of traditional school not being the right fit. These friends found an

alternative model of schooling that provided them the flexibility necessary to allow them to still earn a high school diploma. The researcher believes that it is important to not give up on students who have dropped out and that it is necessary to find ways to re-engage these youth so that they can earn a high school diploma. Education is seen as the great equalizer and the benefits outweigh the costs to both the individual and to society.

The researcher was interested in bringing the voices of these young adults to the public. There are numerous research and studies that explain how alternative education can be successful for students and how it can help prevent high school dropouts, but there is little to no study that interviews students from independent study high schools. It was important to the researcher to learn what helped these former students be successful. The researcher wanted to understand what motivated them or helped them earn a high school diploma so that he could make better-informed decisions for the current youth he serves.

**Summary**

**Figure 9**

*Timeline of Study*



- February 2020
  - Apply and obtain IRB exempt status based on Summary of Expedite Category 7 criteria
- March 2020
  - Reach out to potential participants
  - Send out GSE Questionnaire through Qualtrics
- April - July 2020
  - Select participants and conduct interviews
- August - October 2020
  - Transcribe and Analyze Data
- November - December 2020
  - Report Findings and Conclusions in Chapters 4 and 5

Chapter 3 presented the methodology, interpretative phenomenological analysis, the research questions, the instrumentation, the procedures that was used in the study, and the

population. This chapter describes how data were collected and analyzed, as well as triangulation. In addition, the chapter also discussed the pilot study, human subjects' protection, and provided information about the research site and gives the timeline for the study (see Figure 9).

**Chapter 4: Reporting the Data**

**Objective**

This chapter contains the results of a phenomenological research study that investigated the reasons why students return to high school, through an independent study model, after dropping out of high school to complete their high school requirements and obtain a high school diploma. Chapter 4 is divided into eight sections. The first section provides a brief overview of the research sites. The second section introduces the participants. The third section reviews the data collection process. The fourth section delineates the data analysis. The fifth section presents the findings. The sixth section explains the triangulation of data. The seventh section presents the interpretation of the findings. The final section is a summary of this chapter. This study aimed to answer the following questions:

- What factors led high school dropouts to return to high school?
- What factors led re-engaged youth to stay in school and graduate?
- What does independent study provide re-engaged youths?

**Research Sites**

The participants from the study came from one of two research sites, Independent Study High School 1 (ISHS 1) or Independent Study High School 2 (ISHS 2). ISHS 1 has been serving its community for 12 years and ISHS 2 has been serving its community for seven years. Both high schools are charter schools that are operated by the Independent Study Union (ISU), which oversees over 90 independent study high schools nationally.

ISHS 1 and ISHS 2 are six miles apart from one another and serve students within a 20-mile radius of an urban area located in Southern California. The schools have continuous open enrollment, where students can enroll at any time throughout the calendar year. Furthermore, the

schools operate year-round, only closing for academic instruction for 27 school days out of the year. The schools are closed for major holidays, winter recess, Thanksgiving break, and spring break. Both schools support students from 9th to 12th grade between the ages of 14 and 24.

ISHS 1 is in a city with a population of 109,673 where 42% of the population are African Americans and 49.9% Hispanic or Latino, a median income of $50,335, and only 75.7% of its residents ages 25 or older have a high school diploma (U.S. Census Bureau, 2019). ISHS 1 serves a student population that is reflective of the community in that 55% of the students are African Americans, 40% are Hispanic or Latino, and the remaining students are White, Asian, and/or Pacific Islanders. 99% of the students enrolled at ISHS 1 qualify to receive reduced-price or free meals at school. Additionally, 33% of the students served are between the ages of 18 to 24. The school, itself, operates on the second floor of an office building with approximately 15,000 square feet for instruction.

Although ISHS 2 is only six miles away from ISHS 1, it serves a distinctly different community. ISHS 2 is in a city that is much larger than ISHS 1. ISHS 2 serves a city with a population of 3,792,621 where 52.4% of the population are White, 48.6% Hispanic or Latino, and 8.9% African American (U.S. Census Bureau, 2019). According to the U.S. Census Bureau (2019), the median household income is $58,385. Additionally, 77% of individuals 25 years or older hold a high school diploma (U.S. Census Bureau, 2019). Although, though the community is predominantly white, ISHS 2 is not reflective of the community. ISHS 2 serves a higher minority student population where 50.5% of the students are African American, 34% Hispanic or Latino, and 0.5% white. Like ISHS 1, 99% of the students qualify to receive reduced-price or free meals at school. Further, similar ISHS 1, 33% of the student population is between the ages

of 18 to 24. Unlike ISHS 1, ISHS 2 is collocated within a church and has approximately 3,000 square feet of space for instruction.

### Covid-19 Impact

Prior to the start of data collection for this study, the state of California issued a shelter-in-place order on March 19, 2020 as the COVID-19 pandemic began (Arcuni & Stryker, 2020). This forced both research sites to close to in-person instruction and shift to a distance learning model. During this time, ISHS 1 was able to maintain contact and support approximately 65% of the students it served; 35% of the students and their families stopped returning phone calls, stopped checking into class, or had phone numbers that had been disconnected during the pandemic. ISHS 2, on the other hand, was able to maintain contact and support approximately 45% of the students it served; 55% of the students and their families stopped returning phone calls, checking into classes, or had phone numbers that were no longer working.

Additionally, as a result of the shelter-in-place orders, this study was delayed approximately a month from its original timeline of March 2020. Once it became evident that there was no clear timeline for when the shelter-in-place orders would be lifted, the researcher decided to begin the study and conduct interviews digitally and remove any in-person interviews or meetings.

As recruitment of participants began in April 2020, this researcher noticed the same trends that the research sites had when reaching out to former students of ISHS 1 and ISHS 2; that there was a higher chance of success contacting an individual that attended ISHS 1 than that of ISHS 2. At least two phone calls were made and at least three e-mails were sent to all potential participants from both ISHS 1 and ISHS 2. Many of the phone numbers provided by the superintendent of ISHS 1 and ISHS 2 were either disconnected or had been reassigned to a new

person altogether. However, the phone numbers and contacts for ISHS 1 had a higher chance of success than that of ISHS 2. Almost 80% of the contacts for ISHS 2 were invalid. This resulted in a significantly smaller pool of participants from ISHS 2 than that of ISHS 1.

**Participants**

In the study, 19 participants participated in the questionnaire process, of which 15 were graduates of ISHS 1 and four were graduates of ISHS 2. Of the 15 participants from ISHS 1, seven were males, and eight were females. All participants from ISHS 2 were female. Of these 19 participants, 14 agreed to participate in the interview protocol. Of the 14 participants, nine were female and five were males. Eleven of the participants attended ISHS 1 and three attended ISHS 2.

**Table 4**

*Interview Protocol Participants*

| Participant ID | Age | Gender | Current Occupation |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| ISHS 1S1 | 23 | Male | Construction Worker |
| ISHS 1S2 | 19 | Female | Receptionist/College Student |
| ISHS 1S3 | 22 | Male | Fryer |
| ISHS 1S4 | 23 | Female | Medical Assistant |
| ISHS 1S5 | 24 | Female | Receptionist |
| ISHS 1S6 | 22 | Male | Machinist/College Student |
| ISHS 1S7 | 19 | Female | Foster Youth Advocate |
| ISHS 1S8 | 20 | Female | College Student/Customer Service Representative |
| ISHS 1S9 | 22 | Male | Unemployed |
| ISHS 1S10 | 18 | Female | College Student/Barista |
| ISHS 1S11 | 21 | Male | Security Guard |
| ISHS 2S1 | 25 | Female | College Student |
| ISHS 2S2 | 19 | Female | College Student |
| ISHS 2S3 | 26 | Female | Certified Sterile Technician |

During the interview protocol, demographic information such as age, family life, number of high schools attended (including the independent study high school), how many years the participant was enrolled in high school, and current occupations were obtained from the interview protocol participants, as presented in Table 4. The ages of these participants ranged from 18 to 26. Their occupations varied from college student to receptionist to machinist to certified sterile processing technician. Additionally, as displayed in Figure 10, every participant attended at least one other high school prior to attending the independent study high school.

**Figure 10**

*Interview Protocol Participants' Number of High School Attended*
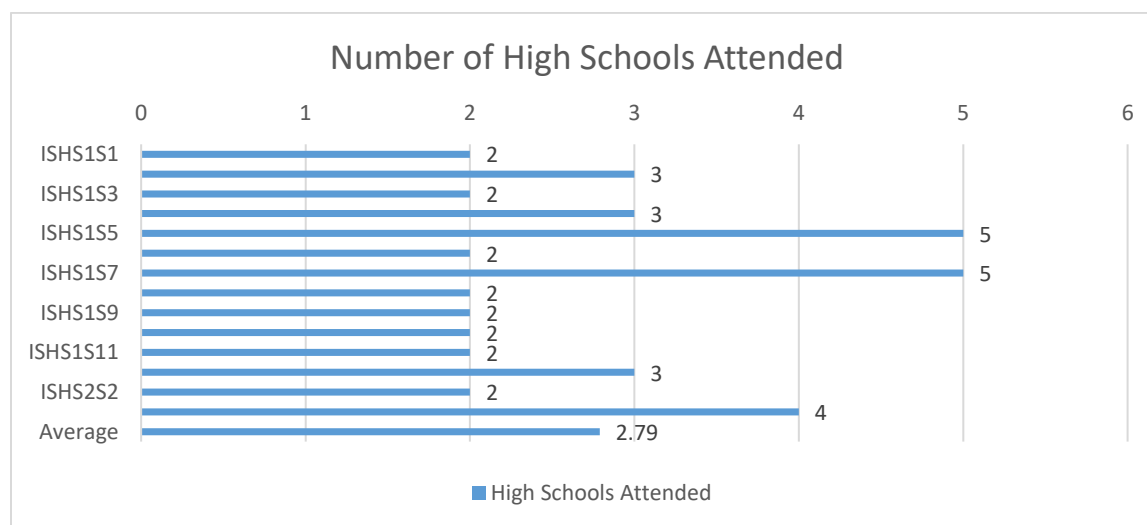


The duration the participants were actively enrolled in high school ranged from four years to eight and a half years, with the average being five years, as displayed in Figure 11.

**Figure 11**

*Years Enrolled in High School*



Number of Years Enrolled in High School
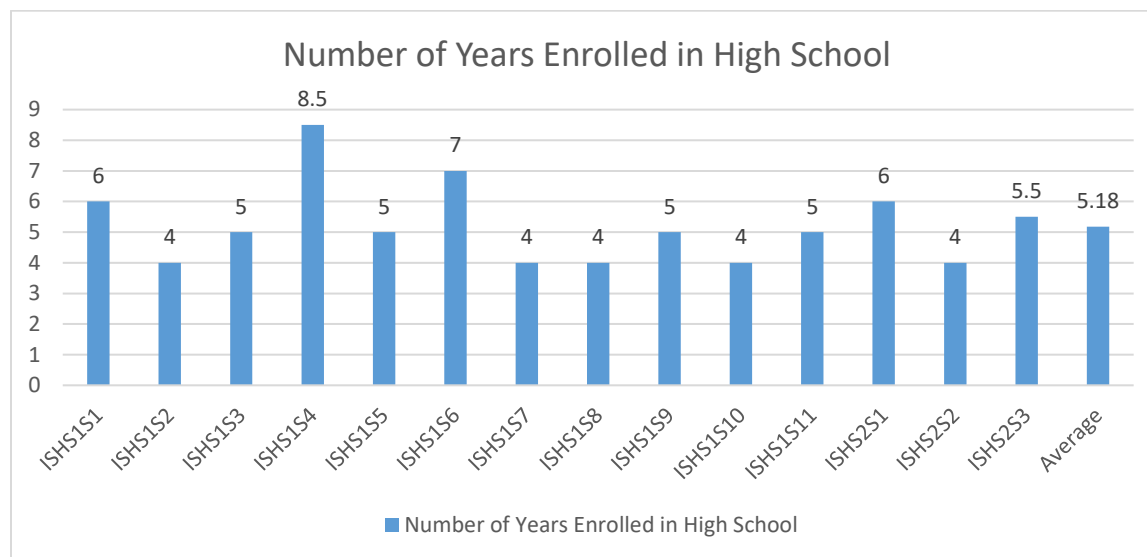
Figure 12 shows the duration of months the participants were not attending high school prior to enrolling at either ISHS 1 or ISHS 2.

**Figure 12**

*Length of Time in Months Participants Were Out of School*



Number of Months not Attending High School
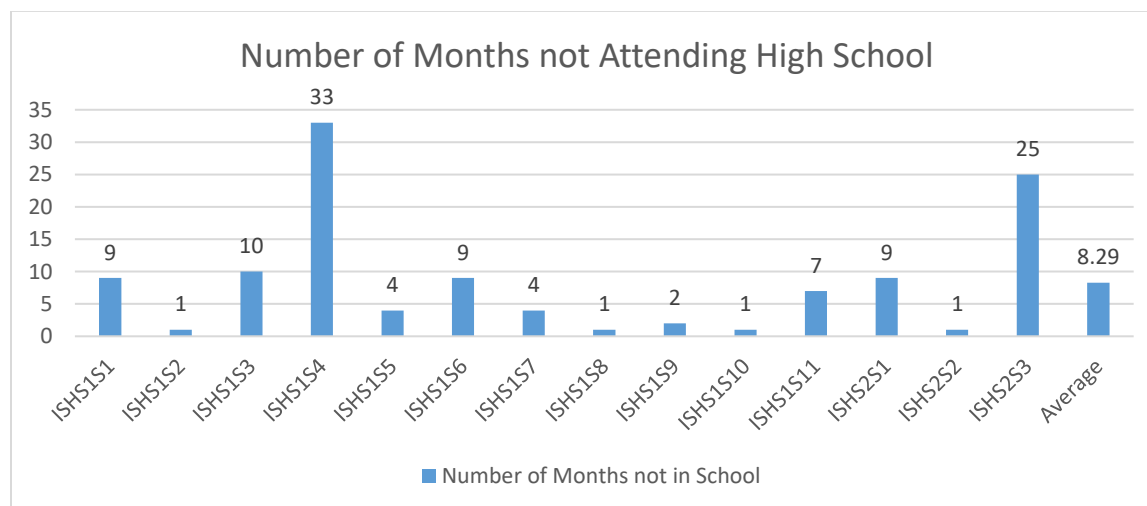
Each participant was asked the same open-ended questions to gather information related to their personal experiences of dropping out of high school, re-enrolling in an independent study

high school, and ultimately earning a high school diploma through the independent study high

school.

**Data Collection**

Before the start of the study, a small pilot study was utilized. The pilot study had four

individuals that volunteered and participated. The purpose of the pilot study was to simulate the

interview protocol and determine whether the interview protocol needed further refinement for

clarity and answerability. Following the interview protocol, the interviews were then transcribed

and analyzed to verify the effectiveness and validity of the results. The four pilot participants

were asked whether they would be willing to give feedback following the transcription; two of

the pilot participants were willing, while the other two declined. The two pilot participants that

were willing to give feedback informed the researcher that the transcripts were accurate and

reflected what they were verbalizing and their thought process throughout the interview protocol.

Also, the researcher and a doctoral peer determined that no further changes were needed.

However, the researcher and the peer did determine that the research question, "Do you have

anything you would like to share regarding your experiences as you earned your high school

diploma?" could be utilized as an opener in the event the participant are nervous or hesitant to

share immediately. Throughout the interview process, this question was not needed as a starter

question as all participants were comfortable in sharing their experiences.

For this study, there were three sources of research data: (a) the Generalized Self-

Efficacy (GSE) questionnaire, (b) the interview, and (c) the research memos. The interview

script is included in Appendix D and the GSE questionnaire is included in Appendix E.

The data collection occurred between April 13, 2020, and May 28, 2020, as outlined in Chapter 3. Due to COVID-19 and stay-at-home-orders, all interviews were conducted virtually using Zoom or Skype. As outlined in Chapter 3, the data collection procedure consisted of:

- Securing a list of school alumni as potential participants from the superintendent of ISHS 1 and ISHS 2. These participants were sent a recruitment e-mail (see Appendix B) to determine their willingness to participate in the study.

- Participants who wished to participate in the study were provided a consent form (see Appendix C) alongside an explanation of the study and what the consent form covered.

- Once the consent form was signed, the participants were then asked to complete a GSE questionnaire (see Appendix E), through Qualtrics. In total, 19 participants completed the questionnaire. Participants who participated in the questionnaire were eligible for a raffle of a $25 Amazon gift card, as stated in the recruitment e-mail.

- Following the questionnaire, participants were invited to participate in a semi-structured interview. Of the 19 participants that completed the questionnaire, five declined to participate in the interview.

- Prior to the start of an interview, the researcher reviewed the consent form with each participant. During the review of the consent form, each participant was reminded that their participation was voluntary and that they could opt-out at any time.

- The interview protocol was used by the researcher to ask the participants to give their perceptions about their experiences of dropping out of high school, enrolling in an independent study high school, and eventually earning a high school diploma through

the independent study high school. Participants that participated in the interview were eligible for the second raffle of a $25 Amazon gift card, as stated in the recruitment e-mail.

- The interviews were conversational and informal.

- Follow-up interviews were conducted as necessary. Only one interview had a follow-up interview to seek more clarity and understanding as to the factors that led to the participant dropping out.

All participants completed, at minimum, the GSE questionnaire that consisted of eight questions: two demographic and six pertaining to self-efficacy. The GSE questionnaire took participants approximately 10 minutes to complete. Following the questionnaire, participants were invited for one 30 to 60-minute semi-structured interview that consisted of 30 questions via Zoom or Skype. Finally, research memos were taken throughout the process by the researcher to provide more insight regarding the participants' experiences.

**Data Analysis**

The researcher utilized the same approach for data analysis for each source of data in this study: (a) the GSE questionnaire and (b) the interview protocol. The data collected from both the questionnaires and interviews were reviewed several times and analyzed manually at first. The IPA process was utilized to make meaning of each interview protocol participant's story, which, according to Smith et al. (2009), included the following six steps:

- Read and re-read the transcripts

- Initial noting

- Developing emergent themes

- Searching for connections across emergent themes

- Moving to the next case

- Looking for patterns across cases

The researcher submitted the audio files of the interviews to Rev.com for electronic transcription at the conclusion of each interview. Rev.com is an online company that utilizes human professionals for transcription purposes. Each audio file was transcribed and returned to the researcher within 24 hours. All identifiable information was removed prior to submitting for transcription by Rev.com. Each file was labeled with the participant's code. The codes were either ISHS 1 or ISHS 2 to reflect which school the participant graduated from, followed by the letter S and a number (e.g., ISHS 1S1 or ISHS 2S2). Upon receiving the transcripts from Rev.com, the researcher then printed out each transcript and read through line by line, correcting any errors that may have occurred during transcription. Further, during this process, the researcher annotated and made notes in the margin to capture initial ideas or thoughts that may have arisen while reading the transcripts.

Five of the participants were randomly selected and asked to provide feedback or comments once the interviews had been transcribed to confirm the accuracy of their interview. All five participants provided feedback. Four participants stated the transcription was accurate. The fifth participant stated everything was accurate except for the place of employment. Member checks provide one source of validity of the interview data collected (Maxwell, 2013). Following the member checks, the researcher read and re-read the transcripts to reach an understanding of the data and the main issues in the phenomenon being studied (Vaismoradi et al., 2016).

After completing multiple readings of the interview transcripts, the researcher began the coding process by hand. The codes formed were guided by the research questions with a focus on the factors that led dropouts to re-enroll in high school, what kept the youth re-engaged after

re-enrolling, and what does an independent study school provide re-engaged youth. Each code created during the open coding process was a label that depicted the core topic of a segment of data found throughout the interview transcripts (Boejie, 2010).

At the conclusion of the hand coding of the interview transcripts, the data were uploaded to HyperResearch® to maintain, control, and reconstruct the data collected for further analysis and coding. Each of the interview data was transcribed, which created 14 Word document files of varying lengths. The data were utilized to draw conclusions related to the purpose of the study and the research questions. As the transcripts were coded in HyperResearch®, additional codes appeared throughout the data. Additionally, the relationships between the codes became more apparent. In total, 21 codes were identified from the interview transcripts, as seen in Table 5.

**Table 5**

*Codes Created During the Open Coding Process of the Interviews*

| Number | Code |
|---|---|
| 1 | Academic Support |
| 2 | Belief in Self |
| 3 | Bullying |
| 4 | Choice |
| 5 | Family Support |
| 6 | Health |
| 7 | Knowing a Graduate |
| 8 | Lack of Academic Support |
| 9 | Lack of School Support |
| 10 | Motivation |
| 11 | Opportunities a High School Diploma Provides |
| 12 | Personal Issues |
| 13 | Regret |
| 14 | Schedule |
| 15 | School Activities |
| 16 | School Environment |
| 17 | School Safety |
| 18 | School Staff Support |
| 19 | Support System |
| 20 | Supporting Family |
| 21 | Work was a Priority |

Upon completing the coding process by hand and on HyperResearch® for the interview transcripts, the researcher repeated the open coding process once again for the GSE questionnaire. The questionnaire data were uploaded to HyperResearch® for additional coding in the form of an excel file. The GSE questionnaire coding resulted in an additional 34 codes. After the completion of the open coding process for the interviews and GSE questionnaire, a total of 55 codes were created.

**Table 6**

*Code Tree Generated During the Coding Process*

---

Belief in Self
Choice
  • Schedule
Knowing a Graduate
Lack of School Support
  • Bullying
  • Lack of Academic Support
Motivation
  • Opportunities a High School Diploma Provides
  • Regret
Personal Issues
  • Health
  • Supporting Family
School Environment
  • Academic Support
  • School Activities
  • School Safety
Support System
  • Family Support
  • School Staff Support
Work was a Priority

---

Following the open coding process, the researcher utilized axial coding to determine the relationships among the open codes. The primary purpose of axial coding is to assist in reorganizing the codes, determining which codes are the dominant ones and secondary sets of codes to assist in making connections between the codes (Boejie, 2010). Axial coding allowed

this researcher the opportunity to review the codes, in relation to the research questions, and create a code tree where distinctions were made between main categories and subcategories (Boejie, 2010). The code tree that was developed during the axial coding process is reflected in Table 6.

Axial coding was concluded once saturation occurred and no additional codes or categories were needed. Following axial coding, selective coding began. The purpose of selective coding was to reassemble the data in order to answer the research questions in this study (Boejie, 2010). The reassembled data determined the themes and subthemes that emerged for each of the three research questions.

As part of the data analysis, this researcher utilized a matrix that was structured around the research questions to organize the themes, subthemes, codes, and data segments in this study. Further, this researcher utilized tallies to calculate the frequency of the themes and subthemes in the GSE questionnaire and select interview questions. The tallies reflect the frequency in which the participants mentioned a specific theme or subtheme.

In addition to the GSE questionnaire and the interviews, research memos were developed and used to provide as much detail and data as possible before the interview protocol, during the interview protocol, and after the interview protocol as the transcripts were coded. These research memos supported the researcher in making concept leaps from the raw data to those abstractions that can explain research phenomena in the context in which it was examined (Birks et al., 2008).

Additionally, after the research developed the codes and themes, he had a doctoral peer review these codes and themes to ensure that they aligned with the data and to provide input if there were any additional themes or codes that may have been overlooked in the data.

The following section presents the findings for the GSE questionnaire and the interviews. The findings from each source of data will be presented in detail with charts and tables that highlight the key findings and themes that emerged from the data.

**Presentation of Findings**

*GSE Questionnaire*

The GSE questionnaire was conducted electronically through Qualtrics in which the participants were asked eight questions. Of the eight questions, questions one and two were utilized for identification purposes, while the other six asked open-ended questions that correlated with an individual's self-efficacy (see Appendix E). These questions ranged from asking how the participants handled difficult problems to their confidence in dealing with unexpected issues. Beginning with question three, the data findings are presented below. Table 7 through Table 12 display the key findings from the GSE questionnaire that emerged in relation to the questions being asked of the participants.

In the GSE questionnaire, Question 3 asked, "What do you do when you are confronted by a difficult problem?" Table 7 reveals that all 19 participants answered the question. Of the 19 responses from the participants, 16 would create a plan of action to address the problem and attempt to solve or address it, two stated they would ask for help, and one stated they would skip or avoid the problem for now and come back to it later.

Question 4 asked the participants, "How confident are you in dealing with issues that arise unexpectedly? Why?" Table 8 shows that 18 of the 19 participants answered the questions. 11 of the 18 expressed that they were very confident, five expressed they were confident, and two expressed that they were not confident. Of the 11 that expressed they were very confident in dealing with issues that arise unexpectedly, ten stated that their confidence stemmed from their

past experiences of handling unexpected issues and one stated they work better under pressure.

Of the five that expressed they were confident in their abilities, four cited their abilities to create

a plan to address the issues, and one did not give a reason. Of the two that expressed they were

not confident, both stated that they do not do well with unexpected changes.

**Table 7**

*Response When Confronted by a Difficult Problem*

| Q03 – What do you do when you are confronted by a difficult problem? | Number of Participants | Percentage |
|---|---|---|
| Create a plan and attempt to solve it. | 16 | 84% |
| Q03 – What do you do when you are confronted by a difficult problem? | Number of Participants | Percentage |
| Ask for help. | 2 | 11% |
| Skip the problem and come back later. | 1 | 5% |

**Table 8**

*Participant's Assessment of Self When Dealing with Unexpected Issues*

| Q04 – How confident are you in dealing with issues that arise unexpectedly? Why? | Number of Participants | Percentage |
|---|---|---|
| Very Confident | 11 | 58% |
| Reasons why very confident: | | |
| Past Experiences | 10 | 91% |
| Works well under pressure | 1 | 9% |
| Confident | 5 | 26% |
| Reasons why confident | | |
| Being able to create a plan | 4 | 80% |
| No reason given | 1 | 20% |
| Not Confident | 2 | 11% |
| Reasons why not confident | | |
| Does not deal well with change | 2 | 100% |
| Did not answer | 1 | 5% |

Question 5 asked participants, "When confronted by a new challenge, do you continue to take on the challenge until you master it, or do you stop at a certain point? Why?" Table 9 reveals that all 19 participants answered the question. Of the 19 participants, 16 stated they would take on the challenge and three stated that they would either quit or avoid the challenge. From the 16 that stated they would take on the challenge, nine stated that it is important to persevere and see things through to the end; six stated that it is important for learning and growth, and one stated she is competitive and liked challenges. Of the three that stated they would quit, one wrote she would quit due to frustration, another wrote she would quit due to a lack of interest in the challenge, and the third wrote she would quit because of her fear of failure.

**Table 9**

*Participants' Response on Being Confronted by a New Challenge*

| Q05 – When confronted by a new challenge, do you continue to take on the challenge until you master it, or do you stop at a certain point? Why? | Number of Participants | Percentage |
|---|---|---|
| Take on the challenge | 16 | 84% |
| Reasons to take on the challenge | | |
| Persevere | 9 | 56% |
| Important for learning and growth | 6 | 38% |
| Competitive | 1 | 6% |
| Quit the challenge | 3 | 16% |
| Reasons to quit | | |
| Frustration | 1 | 33% |
| Lack of interests | 1 | 33% |
| Fear of failure | 1 | 33% |

Question 6 asked the participants, "Do you believe that most of your problems or challenges can be solved with enough effort? Why or why not?" Table 10 reveals that all 19 participants responded. 11 of the participants stated yes, four stated no, and four said that it was

dependent on the challenge or problem. Of the 11 participants that stated yes, six expressed that the effort equates to success or results, three believed that all problems have a solution, two explained that effort needed to be combined with a plan to be successful, and one stated as long as she did not overthink, she could be successful with enough effort. Of the four that expressed no, two explained that more experienced is needed before the problem or challenge could be solved, two that there's a limit to how much one can do regardless of effort. Of the four that stated that it was dependent on the problem or challenge, all four expressed the belief that outside factors may contribute to not being able to solve the problem or challenge.

**Table 10**

*Participants' Assessment on if Problems or Challenges can be Solved with Effort*

| Q06 – Do you believe that most of your problems or challenges can be solved with enough effort? Why or why not? | Number of Participants | Percentage |
|---|---|---|
| Yes | 11 | 58% |
|    Reasons why problems can be solved with enough effort | | |
|       Efforts equates to success | 6 | 55% |
|       All problems have a solution | 3 | 27% |
|       Effort with a plan | 2 | 18% |
|       Do not overthink | 1 | 9% |
| No | 4 | 21% |
|    Reasons why problems cannot be solved with enough effort | | |
|       Experience is needed before a problem or challenge can be solved | 2 | 50% |
|       There's a limit of what a person can do regardless of effort | 2 | 50% |
| Dependent on the challenge or problem | 4 | 21% |
|    Reasons why it is dependent on the challenge or problem | | |
|       Outside factors may prevent one from solving the challenge or problem | 4 | 100% |

Question 7 asked the participants, "What do you do when you are faced with a difficult task that frustrates you?" Table 11 reflects all 19 participants responded to the question. Of the 19 participants, eight stated they would take a break to calm down before returning to the task, seven would develop a plan to solve the task, two would seek help, one would rant, and one would stall.

**Table 11**

*Participants' Response When Confronted by a Frustrating Task*

| Q07 – What do you do when you are faced with a difficult task that frustrates you? | Number of Participants | Percentage |
|---|---|---|
| Take a break to calm down before returning to the task | 8 | 42% |
| Develop a plan to solve the task | 7 | 37% |
| Seek help | 2 | 11% |
| Rant | 1 | 5% |
| Stall | 1 | 5% |

Question 8 asked, "When presented with a problem, how do you go about solving it?" Table 12 reflects that all 19 participants answered the question. 17 of the participants expressed that they would develop a step by step plan to solve the problem, two would seek advice or support from another person.

**Table 12**

*Participants' Response on Solving Problems*

| Q08 – When presented with a problem, how do you go about solving it? | Number of Participants | Percentage |
|---|---|---|
| Develop a step by step plan | 17 | 89% |
| Seek advice or support from another person | 2 | 11% |

*Semi-Structured Interviews*

The semi-structured interview utilized the interview protocol that asked participants approximately 30 questions (see Appendix D). The first eight questions of the 30 questions asked demographics questions which included age, number of high schools attended, years enrolled in high school, and current occupation. Two of the questions asked the participants the reasons for dropping out of high school and the reasons for returning to high school. Seven of the questions discussed what kept the participant engaged to stay in school and graduating after re-enrolling. 10 of the questions pertained to why the participants enrolled in an independent study high school and further asked about their experience at the time they were students. Three questions were potential follow-up questions asking how returning to school felt, if the participant could have done anything differently would she have done so, and if the participant had anything, she would share regarding her experience earning a high school diploma.

The main findings from the semi-structured interviews have been organized by the three research questions they address:

- What factors led high school dropouts to return to high school?
- What factors led re-engaged youth to stay in school and graduate?
- What does independent study provide re-engaged youths?

Table 13 through Table 17 display the themes that arose in relation to the research questions. Further, the tables also reflect the key phrases and quotes taken from the transcripts from the participants' interviews aligned to the themes. These key phrases and quotes have been included to serve as a reflection of the larger data set.

**Factors That Led High School Dropouts to Return to High School.** Participants were asked two questions that seek to understand the factors as to why they decided to return to high

school. The first question asked what led the participant to drop out of high school initially.

Following this question, participants were asked what made them want to return to high school.

Table 13 reveal that all 14 interview protocol participants answered the question, "Prior to

enrolling and graduating from ISHS 1/ISHS 2, what was going on in your life that led you to

dropping out of your previous school?" Six revealed that they dropped out due to a lack of

support, whether emotionally, physically, or academically, from the high school they were

enrolled in, of which three stated that bullying was the reason they dropped out and the other

three noted the lack of academic support is what led them to drop out, five stated they dropped

out due to personal reasons, of which four had to do with supporting their family and one was

due to medical issues, and three expressed that work was a priority at the time.

**Table 13**

*Participants' Reason for Dropping out of High School*

| Q – Prior to enrolling and graduating from [name of independent study high school], what was going on in your life that led you to dropping out of your previous school? | Number of Participants | Percentage |
|---|---|---|
| Lack of School Support | 6 | 43% |
|     Bullying | 3 | 50% |
|     Lack of Academic Support | 3 | 50% |
| Personal Issues | 5 | 36% |
|     Supporting Family | 4 | 80% |
|     Health | 1 | 20% |
| Work was a Priority | 3 | 21% |

Table 14 reveals the themes, subthemes, and key phrases and quotes from participants'

responses as to why they dropped out of high school.

**Table 14**

*Themes in Reasons for Dropping Out*

| Themes | Subthemes | Evidence from Interviews |
|---|---|---|
| Lack of School Support | | |
| | Bullying | I was getting bullied at school and no one really did anything about it and I kind of got fed up with people not really doing anything. So I just had it and decided to get away from the school. (ISHS 1S9) |
| | Lack of Academic Support | Like for math classes and stuff, teachers don't really put enough time into helping students out that are struggling. That made me just want to give up. (ISHS 1S6) |
| Personal Issues | | |
| | Supporting Family | My dad, at the time, was an alcoholic. So it was very tough trying to balance going to regular school. Just my family situation wasn't the best. It was a very unstable situation. (ISHS 1S5) |
| | Health | I was having health problems and surgeries. During that time, I had three surgeries total. I had two fibroadenomas (tumors), one in each breast, and I also had a ganglion cyst removal on the top of my wrist, it was really huge. I was always in pain. Breast cancer runs in the family so I had to get them removed to get biopsied and make sure they weren't or wouldn't turn malignant. (ISHS 2S3) |
| Work was a priority | | I prioritized making quick money at school rather than focusing on like education right there…I've been working. I've been working a regular job, like a nine to five. (ISHS 1S10). |

All 14 participants were asked why they decided to return to high school after initially

dropping out. Table 15 reflects the major themes and subthemes in the participants' responses as

to why they decided to re-enroll in high school. All 14 participants stated that they had found

motivation to return to school and earn the high school diploma. Each of the 14 participants

spoke of the opportunities a high school diploma could afford them, with ten speaking of how

they did not want to live life regretting not graduating from high school and earning a high

school diploma.

**Table 15**

*Themes and Subthemes in Reasons for Re-Enrolling*

| Themes | Subthemes | Evidence from Interviews |
|---|---|---|
| Motivation | | So that's when I just got the kickstart to motivate myself and to keep going and not stop until I have graduated. (ISHS 1S9) |
| | Opportunities a high school diploma provides | I wanted to graduate high school and get my diploma…so I could have a good life and take care of my mom. (ISHS 1S8) Not everybody's going to hire somebody who's not educated at least with a high school diploma nowadays. (ISHS 1S6) |
| | Regret | And I didn't want to be one of those people that said, "Oh, I wish I would've done this in high school or did that, or actually graduated." (ISHS 1S7) |

**Factors that Re-Engaged Youth to Stay in School and Graduate.** Questions 11

through 17 inquired as to how the participants remained re-engaged in school and eventually

graduate with their high school diploma. The participants were asked, "What kept you going

after you re-enrolled in school to earn the high school diploma?" This question helped provide

insight to the various factors that kept the participants engaged in their academics. They were

also asked how they were influenced by others to stay engaged in school after re-enrolling.

Finally, the participants were asked several questions regarding any challenges they may have

had while earning their high school diploma at the independent study high school.

Table 16 identifies the major themes and subthemes in the participants' responses on what kept them re-engaged to stay in school after re-enrolling and eventually earn their high school diploma. All participants spoke of having a strong support system that encouraged them and kept them re-engaged in schooling when they re-enrolled. The support system included family, the school staff, or both. Some spoke of learning to believe in themselves. A few participants spoke of how knowing someone they knew graduated kept them engaged to do the same.

**Table 16**

*Themes and Subthemes in Participants' Response to Staying Engaged in School*

| Themes | Subthemes | Evidence from Interviews |
|---|---|---|
| Support System | | My support team for sure. My counselor, my mom, my support team, not only myself, but my support team. (ISHS 1S7) |
| | Family Support | I didn't know what to expect. But I had my sister there, so she explained it to me since she was enrolled as well at the time. (ISHS 2S3) |
| | School Staff Support | The teachers cared and they call you and made sure you were coming to school. The counselors, they were there. Like if you needed help, they will give you're their office to work on. They cared for you, like if you were their child and stuff. (ISHS 2S1) |
| Belief in Self | | Seeing what I've done and the way I've did it and now I know what I have to do to continue. I know I've been given the tools pretty much. (ISHS 1S6) |
| Knowing a graduate | | I look at my siblings, how they graduated, most of them, how they graduated and trying to follow their example in being successful in life. (ISHS 1S8) |

Figure 13 reveals the frequency of the coding references for having a support system in each of the participant's interview transcripts.

**Figure 13**

*Interview Coding References for Having a Support System*



Figure 14 breaks down the coding references for the subtheme of a family support system in each of the participant's interview transcripts.

**Figure 14**

*Interview Coding References for the Subtheme of Family Support*

Figure 15 breaks down the coding references for the subtheme of a school staff support system in each of the participant's interview transcripts.

**Figure 15**

*Interview Coding References for the Subtheme of School Staff Support*
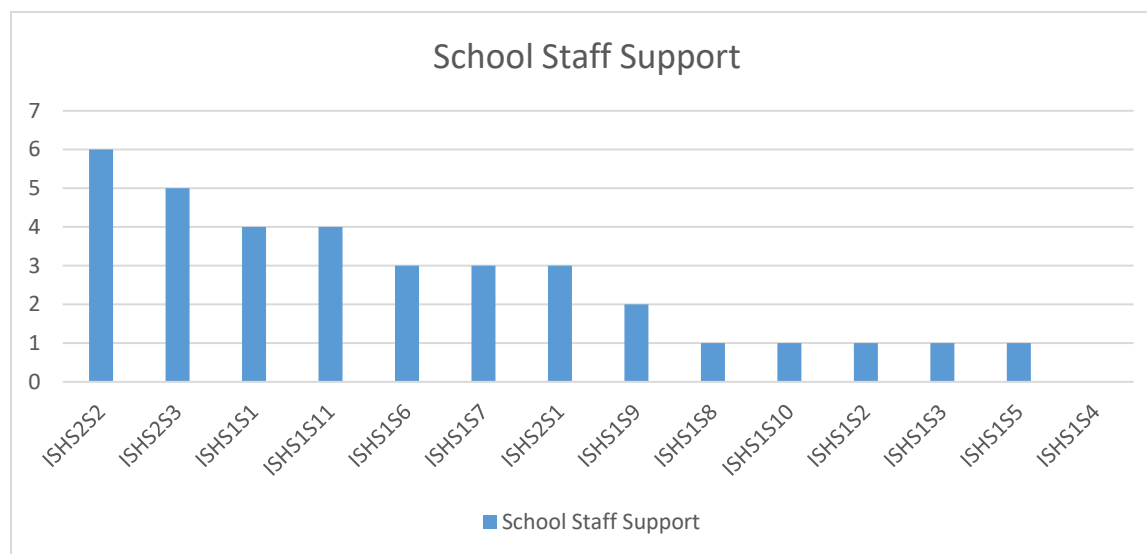


Figure 16 reveals the frequency of the coding references for the theme of belief in self in each of the participant's interview transcripts.

**Figure 16**

*Interview Coding References for Having a Belief in Self*

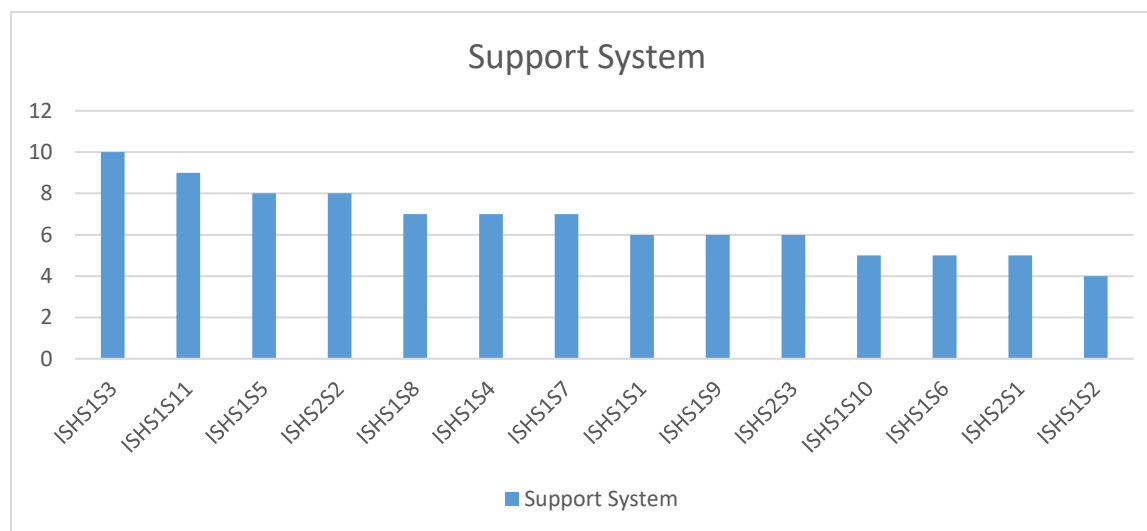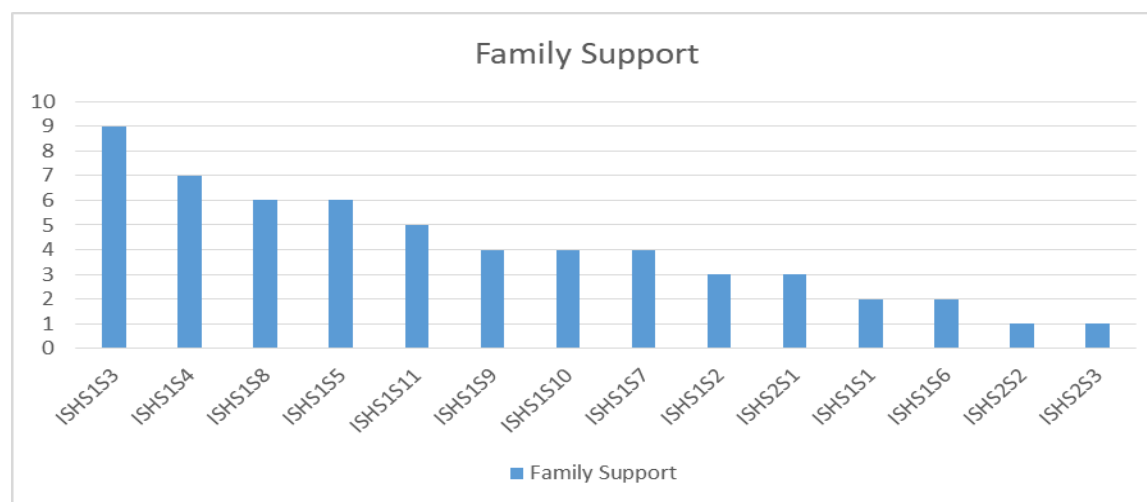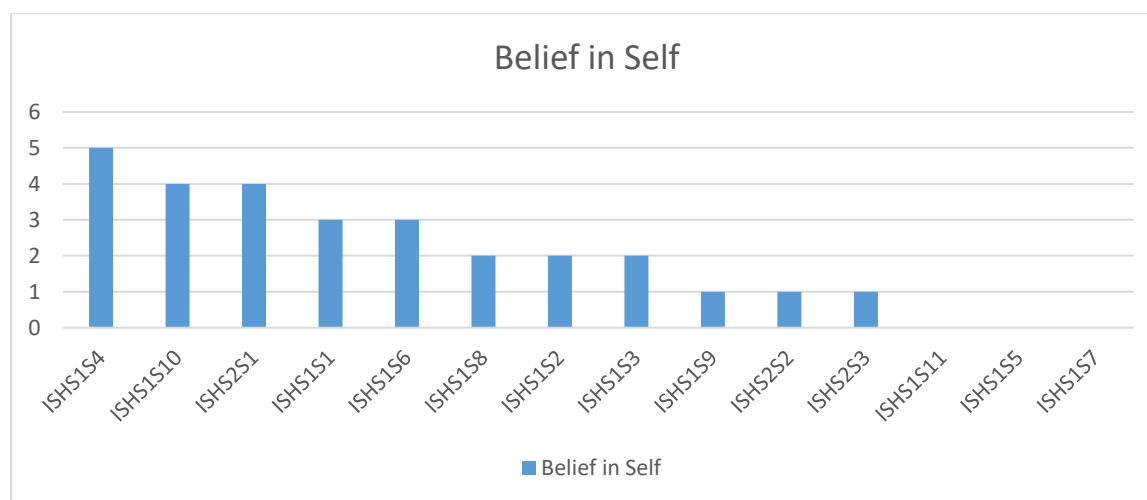Figure 17 breaks down the coding references for knowing someone personally, either a family member or a friend, who graduated from high school in each of the participant's interview transcripts.

**Figure 17**

*Interview Coding for Knowing a Family Member/Friend who Graduated From HS*
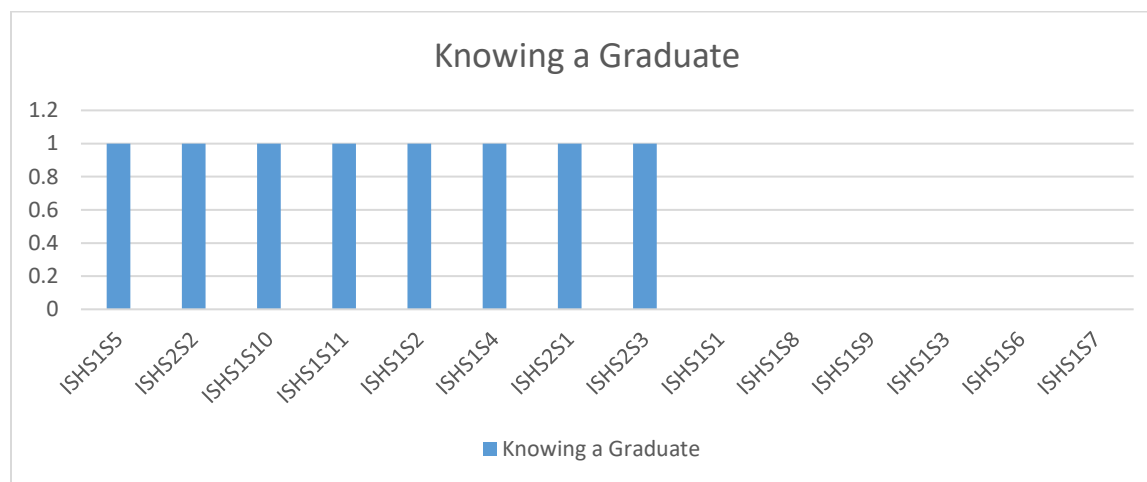


**What an Independent Study High School Provide Re-Engaged Youth.** Questions 18 through 27 asked participants what an independent study high school provided them compared to their previous schools. Participants were asked what made them decide to attend an independent study high school and to describe the independent study high school. The researcher inquired what kept them engaged and be successful at the independent study high school. Further, participants were also asked to describe the differences between their previous high schools and the independent study high school.

Table 17 identifies the major themes, subthemes, and key phrases and quotes in the participants' responses on what an independent study high school provided them as they were earning their high school diploma. Each of the participants stated that having a choice mattered to them in their school schedules and school assignments. They also spoke of the school

environment and how it provided the students with a variety of activities, academic support, and

even the feeling of being safe.

**Table 17**

*Themes and Subthemes of what an Independent Study High School Provides*

| Themes | Subthemes | Evidence from the Interviews |
|---|---|---|
| Choice | | Making my own schedule, choosing my own classes, my own pace was what I liked. (ISHS 1S2) |
| | Schedule | I'm able to go within at least two days out of a week, and still be able to make my money to pay my rent and get my high school diploma. (ISHS 1S3) |
| | | You have the option to finish quicker. And it's at your own pace. (ISHS 1S10). |
| School Environment | | The atmosphere in independent study school is different because I feel like it's just welcoming. It feels like, welcome, come on, study. (ISHS 1S9) |
| | Academic Support | They catch you up or try to see where you're at, why you're there and how they can get you to graduate. You know, what your issues are, what are you struggles and why, or what can they do to help you really. The teachers are all there to help you in any way that you need. (ISHS 1S2) |
| | School Activities | I would say you make lifetime friends through [ISHS 1], the connections and the bonds when they are made, like in the social activities that we do, like sports and things like that. |

| Themes | Subthemes | Evidence from the Interviews |
|---|---|---|
| | | You still have prom, they still have sports. They still have aware ceremonies and movie nights and things like that. (ISHS 1S7) |
| | School Safety | I have never seen any fights. So it's like, you don't have to go to school and worry about some other dude trying to act tougher than you or stuff like that. (ISHS 1S3) |

Figure 18 reveals the frequency of the coding references for the theme of choice in each

of the participant's interview transcripts.

**Figure 18**

*Interview Coding References for Theme of Choice*



Figure 19 reflects the coding frequency for the subtheme of schedule in each of the

participant's interview transcripts.

**Figure 19**

*Interview Coding References for the Subtheme Schedule*



Figure 20 shows the coding frequency for the school environment in each of the

participant's interview transcripts.

**Figure 20**

*Interview Coding References for the Theme of School Environment*
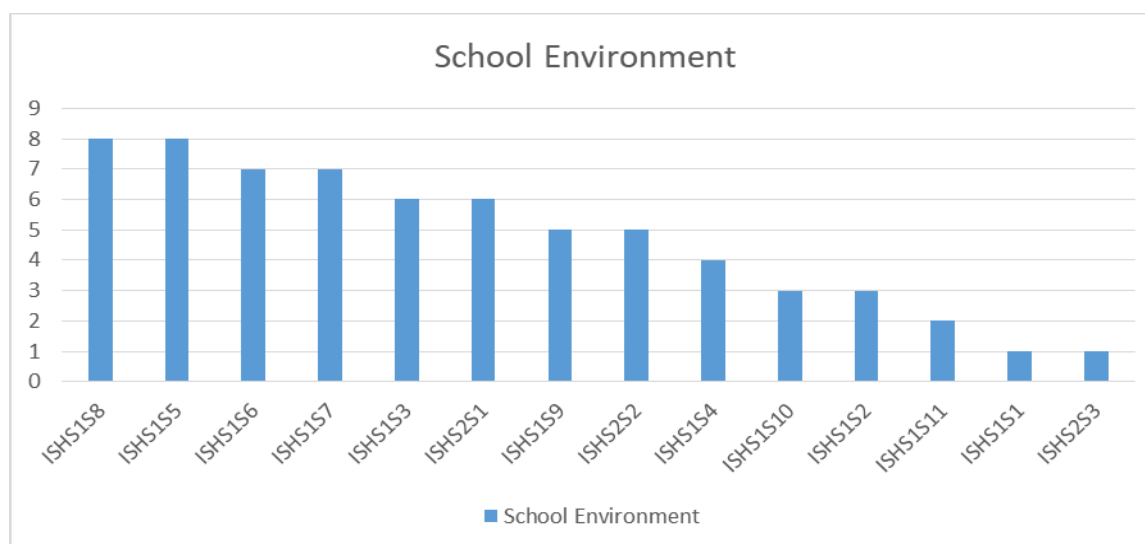
Figure 21 shows the coding frequency for the subtheme of academic support, which includes teacher, tutor, counselor, and/or administrator, in each of the participant's interview transcripts.

**Figure 21**

*Interview Coding References for the Subtheme of Academic Support*
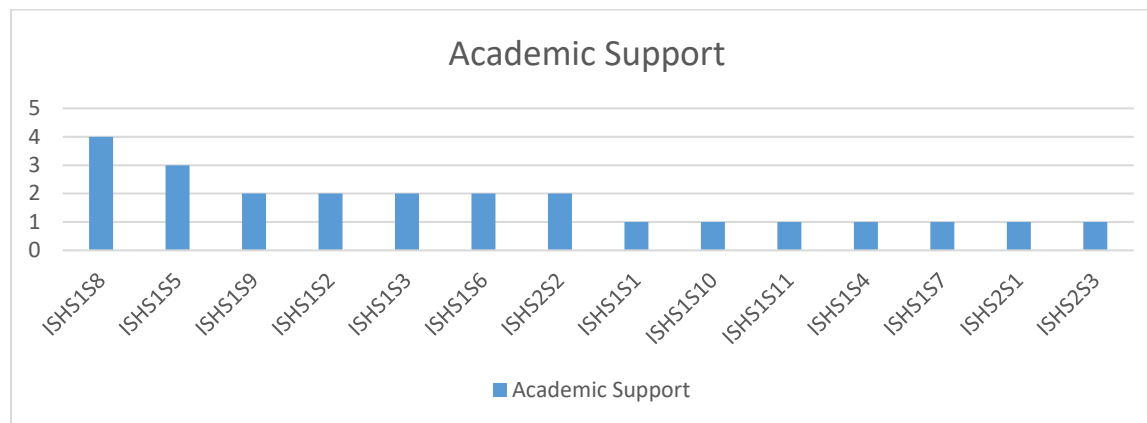


Figure 22 reflects the coding frequency for the subtheme of school activities, which includes school events, sports, field trips, and/or clubs, in each of the participant's interview transcripts.

**Figure 22**

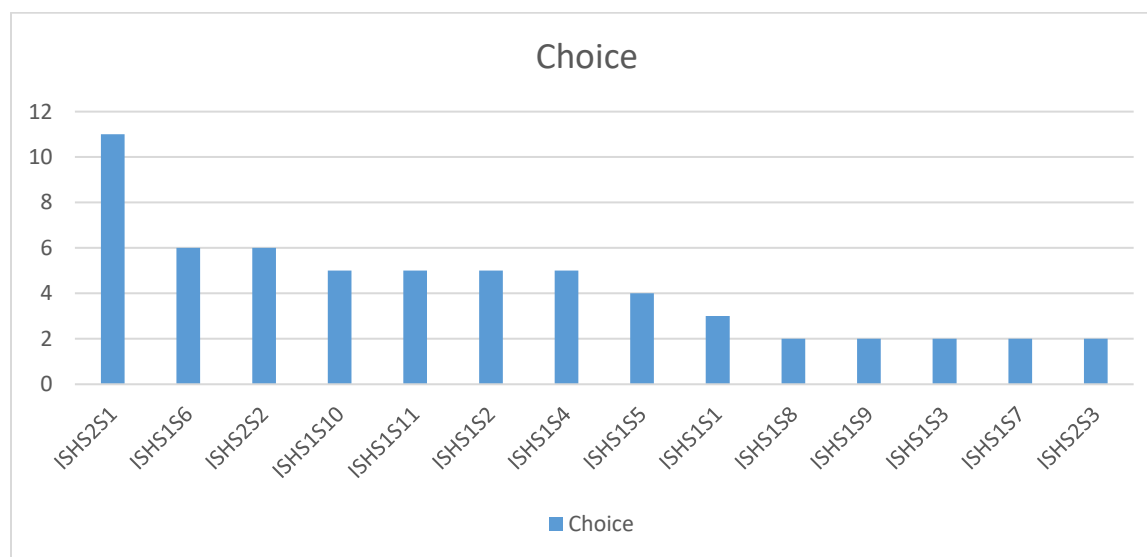*Interview Coding References for the Subtheme of School Activities*
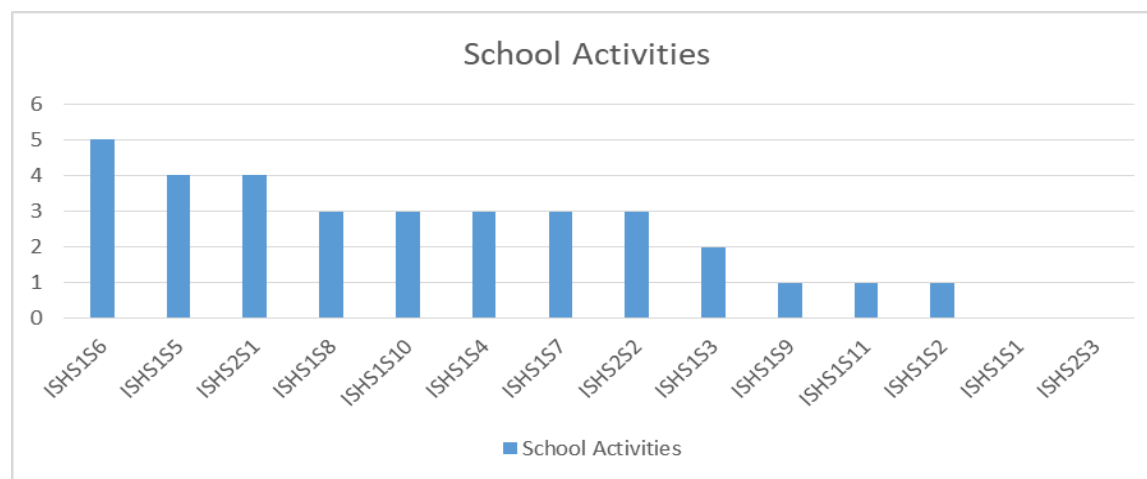
Figure 23 reveals the coding frequency for the subtheme of school safety in each of the participant's interview transcripts.

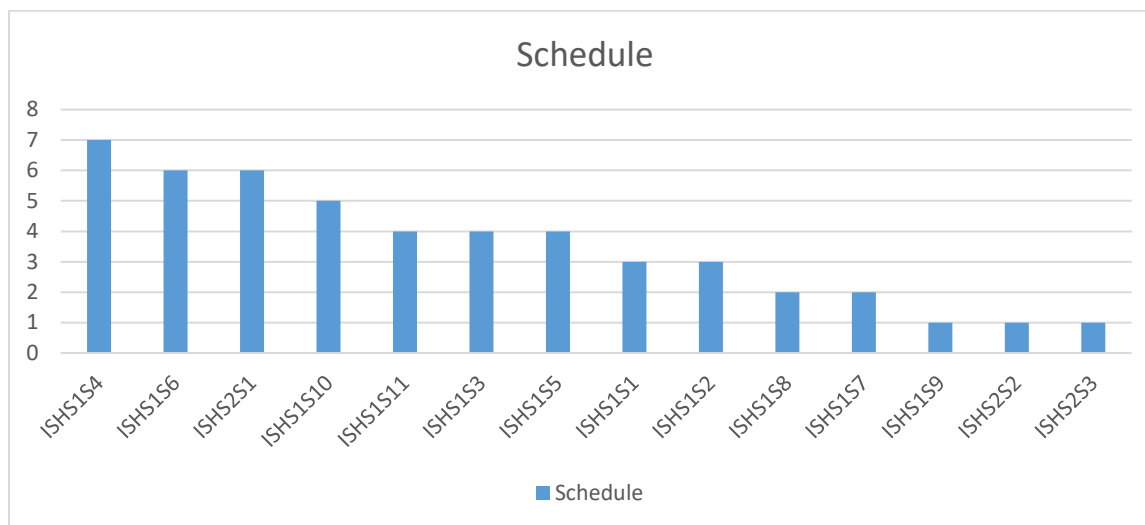**Figure 23**

*Interview Coding References for the Subtheme of School Safety*
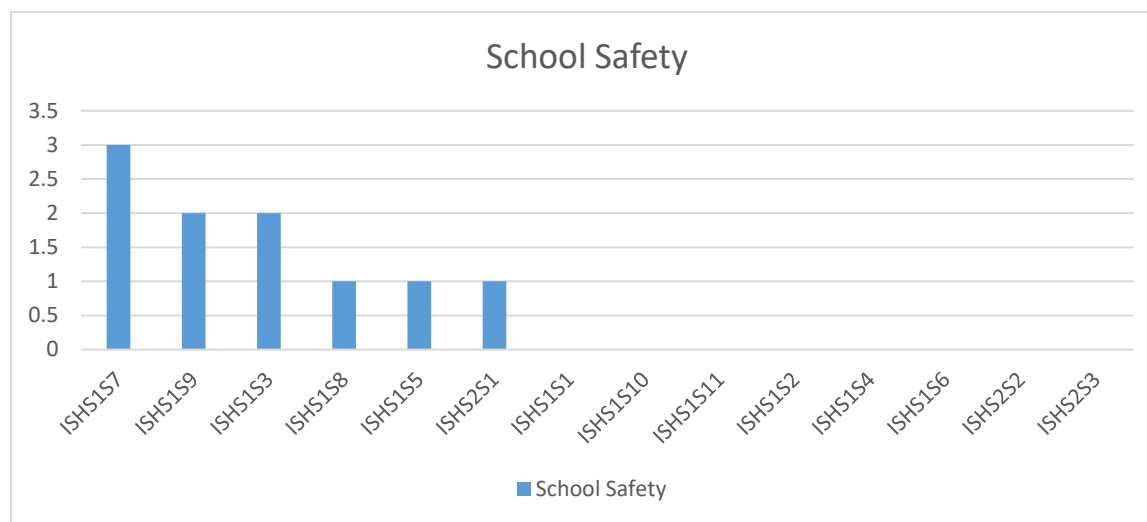


## Triangulation

In this study, triangulation was achieved by comparing the data collected from the primary sources of data (a) GSE questionnaire and (b) the interviews, as well as the research memos (see Figure 24). Data from the GSE questionnaire and the interviews were compared during the analysis process in conjunction to the research memos. Triangulation allowed the researcher to utilize the different data sources as a check on one another to reduce the risk of chance association and systematic biases (Maxwell, 2013). By reviewing and comparing the data from the questionnaire, the interviews, and the research memos, the researcher was provided different strengths and limitations of data that all supported a single conclusion (Boeije, 2010; Maxwell, 2013). By triangulating the data, this reduces the risks that conclusions will reflect only the biases of a specific method and allows the researcher to gain a more secure understanding of what is being studied by testing for consistency (Boeije, 2010; Maxwell, 2013).

**Figure 24**

*Triangulation of Data Sources: Interview, Questionnaire, and Research Memos*
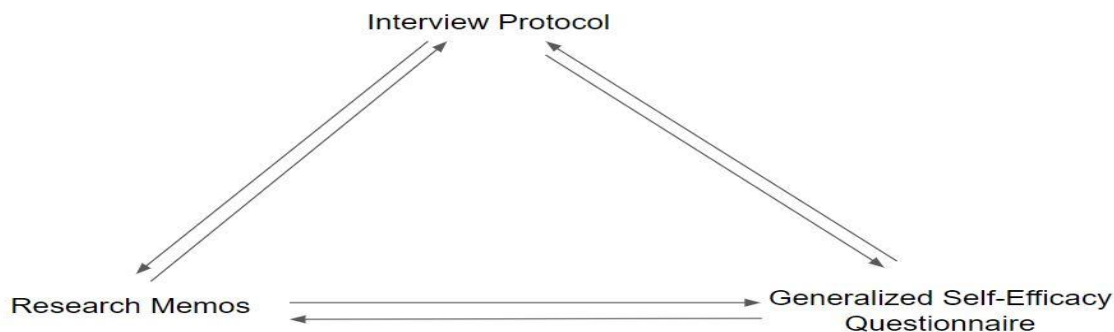


The GSE questionnaire included six qualitative questions that provided insight into the participant's mindset and their self-efficacy when confronted with difficult challenges, unexpected issues, and how the participant goes about solving the problems.

The interview protocol asked participants to share, in their own words, their experiences in enrolling in an independent study high school after having previously dropped out of their traditional school, how they remained re-engaged in school as they progressed towards earning their high school diploma, and sharing their experiences at the independent study high school.

Further, the researcher wrote research memos before the interview protocol, during the interview protocol, and after the interview protocol as the transcripts and GSE questionnaire were coded. These memos were not restricted to just the analytical phase of research, it was also utilized to clarify thinking on the study and to provide a mechanism for the articulation of assumptions and subjective perspectives about the study (Birks et al., 2008). These memos were created to provide more insight regarding the experiences of the participants as they dropped out, re-enrolled, and ultimately earned their high school diplomas.

**Interpretation of the Findings**

The interpretation of the findings is presented as they align with the research questions. The understanding of the experiences of re-engaged youth informed the results in three ways: (a) the factors that led them to re-enroll after dropping out, (b) the factors that led them to stay in school and graduate, and (c) what an independent study high school offers a re-engaged youth.

***RQ1: What are the Factors that Led High School Dropouts to Return to High School?***

The first research question intended to find the factors that led the students to return to school after having previously dropped out of high school. During the interviews, each of the participants was asked what made them decide to return to high school after dropping out. All 14 participants stated that they were wanted to return to school because of the opportunities that having a high school diploma could afford them in life. The participants believed that the high school diploma was a "stepping stone to where [they] want to go" (ISHS 1S1) and that it was important for obtaining a job as "not everybody's going to hire somebody who's not educated at least with a high school diploma" (ISHS 1S6). In addition, 10 of the participants spoke of how they did not want to regret not earning their high school diploma because "without the diploma, you don't have a starting point for your adult life" (ISHS 2S3). Table 18 reflects the frequency of the motivating factors of returning to high school to earn the high school diploma.

**Table 18**

*Motivating Factors to Return to School*

| Motivation | Participants | Percentage |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Opportunities a High School Diploma Provides | 14 | 100% |
| Regret | 10 | 71% |

**Opportunities a High School Diploma Affords.** All 14 participants believed that the high school diploma was an essential component to the next step in their lives. Without the high school diploma, they did not feel they could advance forward in their education or their prospective careers. The participants believed the high school diploma was the key to unlocking any postsecondary schooling or for career opportunities. Of the 14, eight participants stated the high school diploma would provide more job opportunities for them in the future, while six of the participants expressed the importance the high school diploma for postsecondary schooling options.

ISHS 1S3 recalled a significant point where he realized that he wanted more and did not want to continue what he was currently doing until his 50's. He shared the following:

After my mom died and I was working in all these jobs, I started working in Labor Ready, which is a job agency, then I went to painting, then I went to construction working. So, I had all these jobs and I was just thinking, I don't want to be working like this while I'm 40, 50, and I've always liked history. So that's when I said, "Go get the diploma." Because I'm going to achieve it and that's when the goal of becoming an anthropologist ended up existing (ISHS 1S3).

ISHS 1S3 wanted more in his life than what he currently had going on. He believed that earning a high school diploma would be the first step in a series of steps to help him move towards his goal of being an anthropologist.

Additionally, ISHS 1S11 spoke about a point in his life where he knew he could do better than where he currently was. During the interview he said the following:

I want to keep pursuing my education because I…I've had various jobs already. And you know, they're not the highest positions, but they're each…They're each like a little, a

little higher than the last and it kind of shows like where I could get with

education…That I could really aim for higher, higher spots in life (ISHS 1S11).

This participant believed that he was hitting a plateau when it came to his jobs and without the

high school diploma, he would not be able to move further in his career. The participants knew

that they were capable of more because they continued to be successful at each of the jobs they

undertook; the mastery of the skills necessary to be successful at their jobs instilled in them a

belief that they could do more.

Similarly, ISHS 2S3 came to a point in her life in which she knew she wanted to do more

than what she currently had. She stated in the interview the following, "I figured I needed to do

something with my life because eventually I wanted a family of my own and I wanted a good job

and go to college, so I knew I needed my high school diploma" (ISHS 2S3). She believed that to

do all the things that she wanted in life that the high school diploma was the necessary starting

block. Without the diploma, she would not be able to go to college, have a good job, and be able

to provide for a family of her own.

The participants reached a point in their lives where they believed they needed more than

what they had currently in terms of education to advance further in life. Each participant believed

that going back and earning the high school diploma would yield significant outcomes in their

lives. They believed that the high school diploma was the starting block for the next stage of

their life as it could assist them with obtaining a well-paying job or postsecondary schooling

opportunities that they would not otherwise have.

**Regret.** Ten of the participants interviewed spoke about how they did not want to miss

out on earning a high school diploma. The fear of regretting their decision of dropping out

prompted them to return high school to earn their diploma. ISHS 1S1 spoke about how he "hated

[himself] for not completing" high school and wanted to go back to earn his diploma. ISHS 1S2 stated that she wanted to go back to "prove to [herself] that [she] was able to do it." ISHS 1S11 provided insight into his experience and how he began to feel regret for dropping out. He stated the following during his interview:

> I had social media and I was on Snapchat looking at people's stories. Some of my
>
> classmates… They were going to school obviously, and they got to attend some senior
>
> activities, which I didn't partake in, because I wasn't there. And I don't know…I kind of
>
> got worried I was going to be left behind or something, so I decided to pursue my
>
> diploma (ISHS 1S11).

ISHS 1S11 did not want to be left behind or feel like he was missing out on something that he believed was necessary. Through the vicarious experiences of his classmates, wanted to come back and graduate. He did not want to be left behind and believed that graduating from high school and earning his high school diploma was possible. He wanted to remain on equal footing with his peers from the high school he dropped out of, and as a result, he re-enrolled into high school to earn his diploma.

The participants spoke of how they wanted to finish what they started and that they did not want to regret their decision of dropping out and not earning the high school diplomas. They believed that they were capable of graduating and believed that it was important to have the diploma. As a result, they re-enrolled after dropping out and worked towards removing the potential regret they may have felt if they never earned a high school diploma.

### RQ2: What are the Factors that Led Re-engaged Youth to Stay in School and Graduate?

All 14 participants were asked about the factors that kept them engaged when they re-enrolled in school and eventually earn their high school diploma. The interview analysis,

alongside the survey analysis, found several factors on what kept the participants to stay in school and earn their high school diploma: having a support system, believing that they could graduate, and knowing someone who graduated.

**Having a Support System.** When the participants were asked what factors kept them re-engaged and to progress towards earning their high school diploma, every participant spoke of having a support system. The support system could be from their families, from the school staff, or both. The support system mattered to them. ISHS 1S8 stated that her "mom, the teachers, the principals, the entire staff, they made sure we were good and everything and they made sure that we're on top of our credits and that if we needed help, they're always there, the tutors and everybody." Additionally, ISHS 1S7 stated in her interview that her "support team that [she] had grown around [her] and just motivated [her] to continue and stick with" earning the high school diploma. The support system was a major factor in the participants staying re-engaged and earning their diploma.

**Family Support System.** Fourteen of the interview participants spoke about how important their family support system was along their path towards graduation. Whether it was having someone "on [their] ass, telling [them] just to sort of complete high school, at least" (ISHS 1S11) or just having parents to "encourage [them] to keep on going on studying and stuff and try and get better" (ISHS 1S6), the family support system mattered. ISHS 1S6 spoke about how important his family was in his decision to not only return after dropping out but graduating. During the interview he said the following:

> Well, my dad was always telling me like, "You got to finish." It's not a lot like. Coming from him, my parents didn't finish high school. He was like, "Hey, you got to finish. You got the chance. If work is a problem, you don't have to work and stuff like that." They

would always try to tell me not to work and focus more on school. Myself, I've always

liked to be involved in working and stuff like that, but they were always on me also about

staying in school, finishing up. They're also the reason why I continue to study now and

decided on going to college (ISHS 1S6).

His parents, particularly his father, were pushing him and removing any possible barriers that he

may have had so that he could finish earning his high school diploma. His father even told him

that school should be his priority over work. The participant's father verbally persuaded him to

re-enroll in school and to graduate. Further, because his father emphasized the role of school

over work and helping out the family, ISHS 1S6 could focus on school and not stress about

having to balance both work and school. For ISHS 1S6, his family support motivated him to stay

engaged in school, to earn his high school diploma, and to look further than he previously had

with college.

Further, ISHS 2S3 spoke was hesitant to enroll in another school after dropping out, and

the reason why she re-enrolled was because she had the support of her sister. In her interview she

stated:

When I first started, I was kind of worried that it was going to be like the other high

school and because I didn't really know like, I didn't know what to expect. But I had my

sister there, so she explained it to me since she was enrolled as well at the time. And after

I figured it out, I got really excited about continuously going. So for sure she convinced

me to go because at first I didn't want to (ISHS 2S3).

ISHS 2S3 support system came from her sister. Her sister was the one that not only motivated

and kept her re-engaged in school, she was also a student at the school so she could support

ISHS 2S2 physically as well. ISHS 2S2's sister provided her both the verbal reinforcements

necessary for her to believe in herself and the vicarious experience, as a role model, necessary to be successful.

The family support provided the participants the verbal persuasion and vicarious experiences necessary to re-enroll into school and graduate. The family provided genuine feedback that encouraged and motivated the participants to believe in themselves and to move forward towards earning their high school diploma.

**School Staff.** All 13 participants spoke about the school staff, whether it was a teacher, tutor, counselor, or even a school administrator, and how important they were to the participants staying engaged and completing their high school diploma. The staff provided "so much inspiration to never give up on life and no matter what obstacles come" (ISHS 1S9) and that they "are all there to help you in any way that you need" (ISHS 1S2). ISHS 1S4 spoke of how accommodating and how much effort the school staff, which included the teachers, tutors, her counselor, and the school administrators, put in to help in earning her high school diploma. During her interview she shared the following:

> The staff there are so great, they try to accommodate anything you need or, if they have to come to you, that was the main there to where it's like, how could I just stop doing it when I have people that are willing to drive to my house to drop off homework, meet me at my job to drop this off. So, it's like I have no choice. If you can't make it, because work, and you have a kid, we'll drop stuff off or try to meet you somewhere you could just turn in or exchange work. So it was too easy to not just be like, "Oh, I'm going to just not go." (ISHS 1S4).

The school staff did everything they could to ensure that ISHS 1S4 could graduate and removed any barriers, obstacles, or excuses she could potentially have.

**Belief in Self.** Aside from the support system that the participants had in place, 11 believed that they were successful because of their hard work and determination. That earning a high school was possible because they had "been given the tools…and with enough practice and examples" (ISHS 1S6) they could graduate. The participants believed that "there is no point of giving up [that] you gotta keep pushing yourself harder to achieve what you want" (ISHS 1S8). ISHS 2S3 expressed her experience the moment she enrolled at ISHS 2. She stated the following in her interview:

> Like there, when I was enrolled there, I felt like… I literally got into a university, so I was like, "I can do this. This is like achievable." My dreams of education could be accomplished and it's something I can… It's something achievable. It's not something that so far away (ISHS 2S3).

She believed that she could graduate and that it was achievable. She just needed to think that she could first, and once that happened, she graduated.

**Knowing a Graduate.** Eight of the participants spoke about how important it was to them to know someone else that graduated. By knowing another graduate, the participants wanted "to follow their example of being successful" (ISHS 1S8). ISHS 2S3 spoke about how having her siblings graduated influenced her. During her interview, she shared the following:

> I figured I needed to do something with my life because eventually I wanted a family of my own and I wanted a good job and go to college so I knew I needed a high school diploma…My two older siblings had finished school and had jobs so that kind of influenced me to keep going and do what I do to do. Because they did it, I knew I could do it (ISHS 2S3).

By knowing two people close to her that graduated, and by using them as an example, she believed she was capable of graduating from high school as well. Her siblings acted as a model and provided ISHS 2S3 the understanding on how to cope with any potential adversities or failures (Bandura, 1977). Her belief in being able to graduate was altered based on her comparison of what her siblings were able to accomplish and instilled in her that she could also do the same as well (Schunk, 1987).

ISHS 1S9 spoke about how it was current and former students that motivated him and encouraged him to graduate. He stated in the interview the following:

> Just getting inspiration with everyone around and all their stories and just seeing that people actually graduate from the school and actually having seniors or graduates come to the school and talk about their journeys and what they've overcome and what they went through in life to get to graduate and other hardships they faced. Just hearing them say that just inspired me, this created a fire inside of me. It was like, I really want to graduate and just keeping going (ISHS 1S9).

By seeing the successes of others and having the former students return and share their stories, ISHS 1S9 was motivated to graduate.

The vicarious experiences that others provided to the participants instilled in them a belief that they too could graduate. By seeing the successes of friends, families, and other students, the participants knew that it was possible to succeed and earn the high school diploma.

### RQ3: What does Independent Study Provide Re-engaged Youth?

In understanding what an independent study school provided a re-engaged youth, participants were asked what an independent study school was, why they elected to re-enroll in

an independent study school, and what it offered. The participants spoke highly about having a choice in their education and that the school environment was different from a traditional school.

**Choice.** All 14 interview participants shared that having a choice mattered. The participants wanted to try something different from the traditional school format and that they "wanted to try it out, give it a try and see what was the hype all about" (ISHS 1S9). The ability to make their "own schedule, choosing [their] own classes [and] work at [their] own pace" (ISHS 1S8) mattered. Several of the participants were working, helping their family, or going through personal issues that a traditional school may not have allowed them the freedom to be able to "balance [their] personal life, and [their] schooling" (ISHS 1S10). When ISHS 2S1 described an independent school with the following statement:

Independent study is I feel it's a school where basically you are in control of your success. You're in control of your education. You have the ability to say to when to graduate, when to finish, and you have the freedom to do a lot of stuff. So, I feel like independent study is just a program that helps students that want to be able to have the ability to graduate as fast as they can or take it slower or be by themselves (ISHS 2S1).

ISHS 2S1 felt in full control of her education and could dictate what she wanted to do, when she wanted to do it, and how to do it. Independent study allowed her to make choices that worked for her.

Additionally, ISHS 1S2, when asked to describe how it was different from her previous schools stated in her interview:

And you make your own schedule as to when you go in maybe and what time you get to do things. What classes you want to take, which ones you don't want to take, how you want to make your schedule. I think it's a bit different in that way (ISHS 1S2).

Like ISHS 2S1, ISHS 1S2 revealed that an independent study school provided students with a choice and allow them to take ownership of their learning by being able to select courses and creating a schedule that worked for them.

**Schedule.** The 14 participants also stated how the school schedule and its flexibility was vital to them when deciding to enroll at the independent study high school. Those having extenuating circumstances appreciated that they could "go to school once or twice a week where [they] can just turn in [their] work" (ISHS 1S5). Independent study afforded them the flexibility that a traditional comprehensive school would not with its requirement of attending school five days a week. ISHS 1S4 spoke of how helpful the flexible scheduling because she also needed to work to pay the bills. During the interview, she shared:

Sometimes when it was really having to choose between going to school and going to work? I think that's what kind of the last two years that I was actually going to school, it was like, "Okay, go to school or go to work?" School is important, but if I don't go to work, I'm not going to have any money to pay bills and stuff… Once you talk to the staff there, like, "Okay, I can't come basically every week because I have to work. I can't keep missing work," or sometimes I get there on my lunch, and by the time I get there, I have five, 10 minutes to do whatever, see you, sign a paper. And it's like, "Okay I got to go." So, I think after talking and just letting them know, "Either I can come to night school or could you guys stay a little alter one day? Or even days that they weren't seeing students, can I just come take a test, sit in the back or something while you guys have a meeting?" I think that was what helped (ISHS 1S4).

The flexibility in scheduling at independent study high school helped ISHS 1S4 with earning her diploma. She was able to find a balance between coming to school and going to work without having to give up one or the other.

ISHS 1S3 was in a similar situation as ISHS 1S4 when it came to the school schedule. He was also working part-time and found the school schedule beneficial in helping him earn his high school diploma. During the interview, ISHS 1S3 shared the following:

And most importantly, with me, for either having a part time or full-time job and I'm on my own. So, it's like, I can't have a part time job. So, this independent school was just like, "Wow, I'm able to go in at least two days out of a week, and still be able to make money to pay my rent and get my high school diploma?" It's like, wow (ISHS 1S3).

ISHS 1S3 wanted to obtain a high school diploma, however, he had to make sure that he could still afford his rent and take care of his basic needs. Independent study allowed him the schedule to attend school when it worked best for him so that he did not have to need to be forced to choose between working or schooling; he was able to do both.

**School Environment.** In addition to having choices and a flexible schedule, the school environment mattered to all 14 participants. The participants stated that the independent study schools felt different from the traditional schools as it was "just welcoming" (ISHS 1S3) and that "the welcoming environment definitely encouraged [them] to stay engaged" (ISHS 1S10) in their learning. ISHS 1S11 described his school during his interview, with the following, "it's a very student run environment. It's really small, there aren't that many students. Well, what I saw attending at the same time with other students. And it just seemed like everybody knew each other there very well" (ISHS 1S11). ISHS 1S11 appreciated that the school was more geared

towards the students and felt that it was more of a student run environment one than a staff run one. Further, the smaller, more intimate school where everyone knew each other mattered to him.

**School Safety.** Six of the participants spoke of how the school environment helped them feel safe at the school. That having a school where "you don't have other people distracting you or preventing you from getting your knowledge that you're supposed to get" (ISHS 1S3) was important. Feeling safe and welcoming at the school allowed the participants to "have the freedom and be creative [without] being bullied" (ISHS 2S1) by others. ISHS 1S7 spoke about how she dealt with anxiety about going to school and was concerned about being bullied. She stated in her interview:

> I was a really shy kid and I was getting bullied a lot in both of my schools. So why I left my last school was because I had family members going to that school, so that's the reason why I went to that school, but they ended up leaving and then, I was going to be there by myself. They ended up leaving and I didn't want to be there by myself because I felt like I had no protection at all…I had a lot of mental health issues going on around that time…So it was a real struggle. I would go to school, I had to walk in, I would talk to school and I'd get halfway there, and I'd be like, "Mom, can I just come back home? I literally can't handle it" (ISHS 1S7).

ISHS 1S7 was being bullied and was scared for her safety at her previous school. Her family was her protection, and when they left, she felt lost and couldn't handle having to go to school even though she wanted to. This bullying affected her physiological and mental state to the point where she could not handle going to school. The bullying and fear led her to drop out.

**Academic Support.** All 14 participants believed that the school provided the necessary academic support for them to be successful. The participants found that the school staff wanted

to ensure they understood everything and that "before [they] could go home, [they sat] down with [their] teacher and the teacher explained everything" (ISHS 1S8). The teachers would have a one-on-one conversation with the student regarding the topics and concepts and made sure the student understood everything before they could be dismissed for the day. ISHS 1S3 compared the one-on-one support to that of a player receiving coaching from his teacher. He stated in his interview the following:

> The students are all out and the teachers are all on the sideline, like a team, like a football team, I would say. The football players, the students, are in the center and then the coaches are on the side and those are the teachers. And the reason why it's like that, it's because you have those little appointments where you go see your teacher at a specific time where you go see your teacher at a specific time and those times is your time (ISHS 1S3)

The participant received individualized support dedicated to just him. The teacher may have had other students there at the time, but ISHS 1S3 was receiving the dedicated one-on-one time.

Additionally, ISHS 1S6 spoke about how independent study was individualized for each student and that it was not a one size fits all approach. During his interview he shared the following:

> Like in my case there, I was supposed to be done in or in the 11th grade at once or at 12. They didn't start me where I was at their grade level. They brought me back up from some of the courses that I had to completed. They scaled me back up. That way, I don't have to learn something that I have not experienced yet like let's say an English class. They weren't going to throw me to an English 12 rather than the ninth that I haven't

completed. That helped how they were able to put me to a class in the lower grade and

bring it up (ISHS 1S6).

The school and staff created an academic plan that was specific to each participant. By creating

an academic plan that was specific to each participant, the participants were able to master the

content or curriculum presented to them at the time before moving onto the next. The academic

plan allowed for mastery, which in turned helped the participant believe in themselves more and

believe that they could be successful as they continued their education. From there, the school

staff supported each student as they progressed towards graduation.

**School Activities.** Twelve of the 14 participants spoke about the various school activities

that the school offered to keep them engaged and to feel as if they were part of the community.

That being at an independent study school was more than just being "at home all the time and

[going] in to take tests" (ISHS 1S7). The independent study school till had social activities that

included sports, student clubs, field trips, and school events to help the students "stay engaged"

(ISHS 1S10). The school still provided the opportunity to make "lifetime friends" (ISHS 1S7).

ISHS 1S2 spoke about the various activities that she was able to participate in, including ones

that included her parents. During her interview she shared the following:

> They did do a lot of little activities. For Christmas, I remember they had like a lot of
>
> events, even with your parents. I think Thanksgiving, one year they had like a really nice
>
> dinner. They did things for students I think because it's so small or it's not as big as a
>
> regular school, it's very intimate. There's so much more you can do I think they had a lot
>
> of activities for people to do raffles. I know they had. It was fun. (ISHS 1S2)

Despite, being an independent study school, ISHS 1S2 shared that the school provided as many opportunities for school engagement as possible. That the school also did its best to engage with the parents.

Additionally, ISHS 1S10 spoke about how she was part of a student club that helped create events and activities for other students. She shared the following:

> We would have a leadership group during the time I was there, like once a week and pretty much we'll go there and we'll talk about different events we want to do and how to be leaders in the school and how to just walk the new kids in there so they feel welcomed and not feel like no one wants them there or anything. We did the… It was a college thing we went to. Forgot the name of it, but it was the different [independent study schools that] went to a college event that we set up and pretty much we just looked at different colleges and got to learn about what they do or what their school provides (ISHS 1S8).

ISHS 1S8 was able to collaborate with other students and create a college event at her school that invited other independent study schools to visit and learn about their college options.

Asides from being invited to local school functions like ISHS 1S2 or being able to create and organize a school function like ISHS 1S8, ISHS 1S7 was able to go on an out of state field trip with the school. She shared that she went to New Orleans that was fully funded by the school and had the following to say:

> So we went to New Orleans, I mean I never would have thought I would even travel out of state much less with a school. Anyways, so we went to New Orleans for about two weeks and it was a volunteer trip. So we volunteered at different things every day. For the most part we were altogether, the last day we went to different stations, we kind of split

up, but the most memorable things that I did there was I went to the food bank and we helped sort the food bank and give the people the food from the food bank. And then we also went to where they keep the Mardi Gras beads and trinkets. And we sorted them in different boxes. And that was really fulfilling. It was all group activities. We weren't allowed to take our phones, so we didn't have any phone distractions or any communication with our parents or anything like that. And I think It was good because we didn't have our phones to make us antisocial. We literally had to talk because we didn't have anything. So it made us bond more (ISHS 1S7).

ISHS 1S7 was provided an opportunity to go on a service-learning trip where she had to disconnect from technology and form friendships and bonds through dialogue. She found the experience rewarding that she does not believe she would have had the opportunity to attend had she been at her previous school because of the potential monetary costs that her family and she would have paid.

**Summary**

This phenomenological research study was designed to explore the reasons why students who dropped out of high school opted to return to school, through an independent study model, to complete their high school requirements and obtain a high school diploma. This researcher wanted to understand the factors that motivated the participants to return to school and to remain engaged while they earned their diploma. Additionally, the researcher wanted to understand what an independent study school offered to a re-engaged youth. This study utilized three data sources: research memos, a semi-structured interview, and a questionnaire.

In this chapter, the participants were introduced, and the data collection and data analysis process were described. In addition, the chapter describes how triangulation was used to ensure

reliability and validity in this study. Finally, the chapter presented the interpretation of the key findings in the study. The key findings are as follows:

- The participants held a high value in obtaining a high school diploma as they believed it provided them more opportunities than if they did not have one. For some, the circumstances at the time, forced the participants to prioritize their family or personal needs ahead of finishing high school. In addition, the participants did not want to regret never earning their high school diploma.

- Having a strong support system, believing in themselves, and seeing others graduate motivated them to continue working towards their high school diploma.

- An independent study high school offered the participants the freedom and flexibility to make choices surrounding their schedule and coursework. In addition, the school provided them with an environment that was safe, supportive, and filled with activities for engagement.

**Chapter 5: Conclusions and Recommendations**

**Overview**

In Chapter 1, the critical need for research that documented, described, and analyzed former students that graduated from an independent study high school was established. Chapter 2 reviewed the literature on high school dropouts, alternative education, and self-efficacy. The literature established that alternative education, such as the independent study model, may provide a different avenue for students to earn their high school diploma outside the traditional comprehensive school. Additionally, Chapter 2 established a theoretical framework through the theory of self-efficacy. Self-efficacy provided the lens to determine how the mastery experiences, verbal persuasion, vicarious experiences, and physiological states affected the former students through their high school career as they dropped out, re-enrolled in an independent study high school, and go on to earn a high school diploma. In Chapter 3, the methodology utilized for the study was established as interpretative phenomenological analysis, as well as the research design. Chapter 4 presented the findings from the Generalized Self-Efficacy Questionnaire and the semi-structured interviews.

This chapter reviews the theoretical foundation of self-efficacy and how it was utilized to understand and analyze the participants' responses to the questionnaire and interview questions. Additionally, this chapter will present the conclusions, recommendations, limitations, and closing comments.

**Background**

In the 2016-2017 school year, approximately 15% of high school students dropped out or failed to earn a high school diploma in the United States (Kerr & Boyington, 2019). At the state level, the high school dropped out rates ranged between 6% and 28% (Kerr & Boyington, 2019).

The consequences of dropping out of high school or not earning a high school diploma are not inconsequential. High school dropouts are estimated to cost approximately $200 to $300 billion annually as they rely more on Medicaid, welfare, public assistance, and are more likely to be incarcerated (Levin & Rouse, 201; Melville, 2006; Stuit & Springer, 2010). Additionally, dropouts face higher rates of unemployment, earn less money over the course of his/her lifetime, have a higher rate of mortality, are more likely to engage in risky behaviors, are more likely to be incarcerated, and are more likely to depend on public aid than their peers that graduated from high school (Belfield & Levin, 2007; Rumberger, 2011a). The impact of a high school dropout, to both society and the individual, is significant, and as a result, the high school graduation rate needs to be higher.

Despite the numerous studies that examine the reasons why students drop out or leave high school prior to earning a high school diploma, there is a lack of research that examine the self-reported reasons as to why students return and ultimately earn a high school diploma (Bridgeland et al., 2006; Levin, 2012; Rumberger, 2011b, Rumberger & Lim, 2008). Additionally, this researcher could not find any existing research that focused on why former dropouts opted to enroll in and graduate from an independent study high school. This phenomenological research study was designed to explore the narratives of former students who attended an independent study high school, an alternative educational setting, to complete high school credits and earn a high school diploma.

**Theoretical Foundation**

The theoretical foundation for this research was self-efficacy. Self-efficacy refers to an individual's confidence about his or her own abilities and capabilities when confronted by a task or undertaking (Bandura, 1997). Self-efficacy comes from four sources: mastery experiences,

vicarious experiences, verbal persuasion, and physiological states (Bandura, 1986). Mastery experiences are past experiences that provide proof to the individual that he/she can overcome the challenge at hand (Bandura, 1977; Dawes et al., 2000; Schunk & Usher, 2012). Vicarious experiences are external influences, such as peers or role models, that the individual compares himself/herself to determine his/her level of success (Bandura, 1997; Usher & Pajares, 2006). Verbal persuasions can either reinforce or break down an individual's self-efficacy as peers, educators, and/or parents/guardians can impact the individual's self-efficacy through influential and meaningful communication (Bandura, 1986; Hattie & Timperley, 2007). Physiological states encompass how well an individual can cope with stressors (Bandura, 1997). Various studies (Bandura & Locke, 2003; Chemers et al., 2001; Rumberger & Lim, 2008; Valentine et al., 2004) have shown that self-efficacy plays a significant role in academic motivation and prevention of dropping out. The sources of self-efficacy provided the insight on how mastery experiences, verbal persuasion, vicarious experiences, or physiological states may affected the participants through the experiences of dropping out, re-enrolling, and earning their high school diploma. As this researcher analyzed the data from the questionnaire, interviews, and research memos, self-efficacy provided the framework in understanding the participants and their experiences.

**Study Conclusions**

This study was designed to explore the experience of dropping out of high school to later enrolling in an independent study high school and earning a high school diploma. This study intended to answer the following questions:

- RQ1: What factors led high school dropouts to return to high school?
- RQ2: What factors led re-engaged youth to stay in school and graduate?
- RQ3: What does an independent study provide re-engaged youths?

Analysis of the GSE questionnaire, the interviews, and the research memos led the researcher to reach three conclusions based on the research questions:

- Understanding the value of a high school diploma motivated the participants to return to school and earn a high school diploma.

- A strong and positive support system is essential in motivating and encouraging an individual to overcome any challenges he/she may face.

- A school's environment, from the scheduling to the atmosphere to the support a student receives to the school activities, can be crucial in engaging students in their learning.

*Conclusion 1: Understanding the Value of a High School Diploma Motivated the Participants to Return to School and Earn a High School Diploma.*

All 14 participants in this study stated that the high school diploma was critical in providing them more opportunities. Each of the 14 participants was aware of the limited employment options that they would have without the high school diploma. The participants stated they knew the value that a high school diploma had, however, the participants dropped out of school due to a shift in priorities at the time. Five of the participants had personal issues going on while they were enrolled in high school that led them to dropping out and three of the participants prioritized working at the time over school.

Despite dropping out, the participants stated they understood the importance of the high school diploma. Eight of the participants spoke specifically about the lack of job opportunities or promotion opportunities without the high school diploma. Sum et al. (2009) found that for many jobs, one of the minimum job requirements is a high school diploma. While six of the participants spoke about the importance of the high school diploma as a starting block for them

before they began their postsecondary education and future career goals. Education attainment is utilized as a screener for many jobs by employers, and without the right degree or a high school diploma, the individual loses out on an opportunity they otherwise would have had they had a high school diploma (Dorn, 1993). Without the high school diploma, career opportunities and earning potential becomes limited.

*Conclusion 2: A Strong and Positive Support System is Essential in Motivating and Encouraging an Individual to Overcome any Challenge He/She may Face.*

The participants, according to the stories, could not have overcome dropping out, re-enrolling into high school, and earning their high school diploma without a strong and positive support system. The support system provided guidance, motivation, and support as the participants progressed through schooling. The support was provided in different ways based on the needs of the participant: verbal, emotional, academics, or modeling.

The participants spoke about the relationships they had either with family members, friends, or school staff that supported as they progressed through school. These individuals influenced and supported participants throughout the process of earning a high school diploma despite already having dropped out. The individuals were part of the support system for the participants. The support system could have included their family members, close friends, the school staff, or a combination of all three. The support system just needed to have at least one caring individual who believed that the participants could succeed. All 14 participants spoke about how it was important to them that someone was there guiding and supporting them every step of the way as they progressed through their schooling. Students that have a lasting connection with at least one caring adult become more committed and invested in their own

academic outcomes and less likely to be truant or have poor grades (Edgar-Smith, 2015;

Zolkoski et al., 2016).

The individuals in the support system verbally persuaded the participants into believing

in themselves. The communication of positive expectations influenced the motivation of the

participants to continue to progress regardless of any obstacles that they may be confronted with.

Truthful confirmation from others has been shown to help increase the individual's belief in

himself and his success (Bandura, 1997; Fong & Kaurese, 2014). The participants stated that

they had cheerleaders in their corners motivating them to the point where they believed they

could be successful and believed that they could overcome the obstacles in their path.

Additionally, the participants spoke of how important it was for them to know that their

family supported them or if they had a school staff member supporting them; it helped alleviate

any stress or anxiety that they otherwise may have had. The support system ensured that the

participants' needs were met so that physiologically and mentally they could focus on school.

For most of the participants, once they dropped out, they started working and supporting their

families. It was hard for them to return to school if they had to worry about still supporting the

family or had to worry about struggling academically again. The participants had constant

reminders that school was a priority and that work could come later. Having a heightened level

of anxiety or stress has been shown to cause individuals to doubt their own capabilities and

abilities (Hen & Goroshit, 2014). By having the support system that was understanding and

supportive of them returning to school, they were able to focus just on school, which led to better

coping strategies and better management of their stress levels.

Further, many of the participants were concerned that they could not be successful

without the academic support they would need from their support team. One participant spoke

about how he slowly gave up on school when he struggled to understand math. This led him to disengaging from the school completely and dropping out. However, when he re-enrolled, he received the needed support to help him understand math, which re-engaged him back into school. This was a similar experience for most of the participants. The fact that they received the academic support they needed to help them understand the content, helped instill a belief in participants that they could be successful. The more success an individual has, the more willing he is to take on new tasks and challenges (Zimmerman & Bandura, 1994).

Lastly, eight of the participants spoke about having an example that motivated and encouraged them to graduate from high school. Whether it was a friend from school, a sibling, or another family member, seeing them graduate, made the participants believe they were also capable of graduating. By having these role models, the participants were provided vicarious experiences. By seeing others who are similar to themselves, the participants increasingly believed that they too could be successful (Bandura, 1997). The participants were provided a model and example of what is possible if they kept moving forward and overcoming obstacles.

*Conclusion 3: A School's Environment, from the School's Schedule to the School's Atmosphere to the Support a Student Receives to the School Activities, can be Crucial in Engaging Students in their Learning.*

The school's environment is vital to the success of the students. How a student views his school plays a significant role in whether he will be engaged in the learning process or disengage himself completely (Edgar-Smith & Palmer, 2015). The school's environment includes the trust and positive relationships the student has with the school and its staff, school safety, and school activities (such as clubs, sports, field trips, and back to school night in which parents are invited

to). The participants spoke highly of their experience at the independent study high school because of the school's environment compared to their previous schools.

Maillet (2017) states that the foundation of student success is rooted in trust and positive relationships. Students who feel that they belong and are willing to participate in their own learning are the ones who are more likely to graduate (Edgar-Smith & Palmer, 2015; Murry & Holt, 2014). The participants at both ISHS 1 and ISHS 2 spoke about the importance of having a choice and say in their education. All 14 participants stated that being able to have a flexible schedule that worked best for them and being able to choose which classes they wanted to take at any given time mattered. The appreciated that fact that the school did not operate within the normal hours of a traditional school, that the school schedule was flexible and that they had a myriad of options for when they could come to school: mornings, afternoons, evenings, and weekends. The school schedule was flexible and allowed the participants to pick the times that worked for them. Further, although the participants understood that they would still need to take all the required classes, they felt respected and trusted because they were being given the option of which courses to take and when to take them instead of being told which classes they needed to take. This resulted in the participants being more invested in their own education.

Additionally, the 14 participants spoke about the ability develop strong and positive relationships with the school staff. Each participant stated that by being able to have a positive relationship with a teacher, a tutor, the school secretary, or a school administrator, they felt cared for. The relationship built did not have to come from just the teacher, any school staff was able to build the relationship and impact the participant's success. As a result, they felt cared for at the school and understood that the school staff were committed to them and believed in them. These positive relationships lead to increased student engagement in learning and increased the

participants willingness to seek support or help when needed (Edgar-Smith & Palmer, 2015; Murry & Holt, 2014; Zolkoski et al., 2016).

Further, school safety mattered to the participants. Students that feel unsafe at school, both physically and psychologically, cannot learn (Croft et al., 2019). Six of the participants spoke about how they would see fights at their previous schools which made them anxious that they may one day be in a fight. Additionally, two of the participants spoke of how they were being bullied and did not feel safe coming to school. Even the issues were brought up to the school staff, the participants did not feel that the school did anything to ensure their safety. The anxiety of potentially being in a fight or being bullied distracted the participants and they could not focus on their academics as much as they would have liked to. The participants stated that being at a school that felt safe eased any anxiety that they may have had while attending school. This reduced anxiety, in turn, helped them to focus on school and their learning. They did not have to be worried about being bullied or potentially being in a fight.

Finally, 12 of the participants spoke of how important school activities were to them being engaged in their learning. The school activities engaged them and motivated them to do well in school so that they could participate in the various activities that were available to them. School activities create a feeling of pride and attachment for students, which in turn increase their engagement in studying and learning (Konold et al., 2018). The participants stated that the school clubs, sports, field trips, or school events in which their parents and families were welcomed created a sense of community and belonging. In addition, through these school activities, the participants were able to connect with other individuals that were like them and able to create bonds that they otherwise would not have had. The school provided opportunities for the students to develop relationships with peers, which in turn provided them with a stronger

support system. It helped the participants understand and realize that they were not the only ones that had unique situations and that there were others who understood what they were going through. This resulted in the participants being more motivated and encouraged that finishing school because they had someone who could relate to them.

**Recommendations for Practice**

The purpose of this study was to examine what an independent study high school environment offers for students that want to reenroll to earn a high school diploma. The conclusions of this study formed the foundation for the following recommendations.

The findings for Research Question 1 revealed that the participants' decision to drop out was not a decision that was made intentionally; it was a decision that was made over a course of time due to a variety of factors. The participants never intended to drop out of high school. Dropping out was the result of a variety of adverse situations that led the participants to disengage from school.  The findings from this study reveal that knowing and understanding the value an education and obtaining a high school diploma was an important motivating factor to return to school and earn one. It is important for educators to collaborate and communicate with the students to develop plans with clear goals that are achievable. Further, it is important to develop clear goals towards graduation, while also discussing and providing information to each student regarding their college and career interest to maintain student engagement in their learning.

The findings for Research Question 2 outline the importance and strength a support system has on an individual's decision on returning to school and earning his high school diploma. Positive relationships are vital to the success of the students. School leaders, community leaders, and parents can impact student outcomes positively by creating and

implementing a mentoring program at the school in which each student receives a mentor from the moment they enroll into the school until they graduate. The mentor does not need to be a teacher; it can be a tutor, a paraprofessional, a community member, a family member, or even school administrator. A mentor provides the student with someone they can confide in, come to for advice, and someone they can trust to help them move forward in schooling (Murry & Holt, 2014). Individuals that receive realistic encouragement and praise from someone they trust are more likely to try harder and become successful than those who struggle with doubt (Bandura, 1997; Wood & Bandura, 1989). All students should be assigned a mentor to support them and guide them as they progress through their schooling.

Additionally, the findings in Research Question 3 state the importance that the school's environment (collaboration between stakeholders, school safety, and school activities) has on student engagement and learning. A school that makes students feel welcomed is a school that has students engaged in their own learning (Robinson & Aronica, 2016). School leaders, community leaders, parents, and students need to collaborate with one another to develop and contribute towards a school environment that considers the voices of all stakeholders. By collaborating with one another, the school's culture can begin to shift to one that provides the students with a positive learning environment.

The participants spoke of the importance of being able to have a choice in their learning. They spoke regarding how being able to choose which courses they took and the times they were able to take them helped them take ownership in their learning. School staff needs to partner with their students in developing courses and schedules that fit the needs of the students, not the needs of the school. By providing students with the opportunity to decide the courses that they wish to

take, while still aligning with the school requirements, students understand that their voices are being heard and that their education is one they need to take ownership of.

Further, students need to feel safe at school. Learning is nearly impossible when students are getting into fights, worried about getting into fights, or being bullied (Robinson & Aronica, 2016). By creating a culture in which all stakeholders respect each other and dialogue when issues arise, the students can feel more secure about coming to school and not have to worry about fights or bullying occurring.

Additionally, it is important for schools to find ways to keep students engaged asides from academics. School clubs, sports, field trips, and school events are just as vital to student learning as curriculum and classes themselves. Schools need to provide activities that are representative of their student body. By creating events and activities that welcome all students, student engagement increases, which in turn increases the likelihood a student will be successful in school. When students are provided extracurricular outlets, it creates a sense of pride for the students to know that they are part of a larger community (Konold et al., 2018).

**Recommendations for Policy**

Throughout the nation, each state has its own requirements for the minimum number of instructional minutes per day depending on grade level. In the state of California, the minimum number of instructional minutes is 360 per day for 180 days in high school (S. Johnson, 2020). Traditionally, these instructional minutes are conducted Monday through Friday from the 8:00 am to about 2:30 pm. Students are expected to be on campus, in seats and learning for 360 minutes each day as a means of meeting these instructional minutes. However, given the recent school closures due to COVID-19, school districts throughout the nation have shifted and adjusted their instructional models to meet both the needs of their students and the instructional

minutes' requirement. As a result, of the pandemic, now is the time to look at the way instructional minutes are provided. The schedules need to become more flexible and the minutes should not have to be conducted in the same way for all students, Monday through Friday 8:00 am to 2:30 pm. Every learner is different and some work better at different times of the day. Schooling hours needs to be more flexible to allow learning throughout the day. Night school and weekend schooling should be given as options for students and their families. Students and their families need the flexibility to learn based on their own schedule and pace.

Additionally, student engagement is a strong indicator of student success (Konold et al., 2018; Robinson & Aronica, 2016). One way of engaging students in their learning is the school's curriculum. With the current climate and atmosphere surrounding social justice and the Black Lives Matter movement, schools should either require students to take an ethnic studies or social justice class or embed these topics into the current curriculum (A. Smith, 2020). By incorporating an ethnic studies or social justice curriculum into the K-12 education, this allows for the voices of all cultures and ethnicities to be heard and helps individuals build a respect for the diverse cultures of others. Ethnic studies courses are about self-respect and self-determination (Huerta, 2020). These courses are designed to allow the individuals to learn about their own cultures, the cultures of others, and come to an understanding of the cultures. It creates a sense of ownership and belonging in society. Further, these courses will create an opportunity for students to be engaged in the learning of not just their own culture, but the culture of others as well.

**Limitations of the Study**

This study was limited to 14 graduates who were at least 18 years of age and graduated within the past five years, from two different high schools that provided alternative educational

model, independent study, to earning a high school diploma in an urban area in Southern California. All participants had dropped out of high school and later earned a high school diploma through an independent study school.

The sample size and the lack of diversity in the participants reflected a limitation of this study. The sample size reflected only 4% of all graduates from the independent study high schools. A larger sample size would have added more depth and understanding to this study by providing additional narratives. Additionally, the participants were predominantly female, with only five of the 14 participants interviewed being male, even though both schools had a population that is approximately 50% female and 50% male. If the sample were more evenly reflected of the gender, this study would have been strengthened because it would have had a fairer representation of the viewpoints from both genders. Further, all the participants volunteered to participate in this study and the study relied on their perceptions of dropping out, re-enrolling, and graduating from an independent study high school. Findings were limited to the individuals involved in this study. Additionally, the findings were limited to the individuals that met the criteria to participate in the study. The findings were limited to the subject report and did not intend to generalize the experiences of all re-engaged youths.

Finally, it important to address the researcher's positionality in relation to the study and the potential bias in this study regarding dropouts and independent study (Creswell, 2013). The researcher has worked at multiple independent study high schools since 2010 in a variety of roles from teacher to small group instructor to school administrator. During this time, he has seen the positive impact that an independent study school has had on students. In an effort to eliminate the personal biases that the researcher has, the researcher relied on triangulation and member

checks throughout the process of collecting and analyzing the data to ensure that the findings and the conclusions that were presented reflected the data accurately.

**Recommendations for Future Research**

The limitations of this study provide the basis for the recommendations for future research. As this study served as an exploration of the phenomena of dropping out of high school and later re-enrolling in an independent study high school to earn a high school diploma, it is important to expand the scope of the study with a larger sample size.

The researcher would recommend a study to be conducted with a larger sample size to further explore the reasons why students drop out and then successfully earn a high school diploma after re-engaging in their learning. Considering the United States has a goal of graduating all its high school students, expanding the study nationally would provide additional information regarding the phenomenon of dropouts and how schools can re-engage these youths in earning their high school diploma.

The researcher would also recommend a study to be conducted on the impact an individual's support system and the impact that it has on his/her success. The insight into the effects of vicarious experiences and verbal persuasion have on an individual that show signs of dropping out, would be beneficial in the understanding of how to prevent students from becoming a dropout.

Lastly, the researcher would recommend a study to be conducted on the individuals that dropped out, re-enrolled into school, and dropped out again. It is important to hear from these individuals and their experiences to determine what led to these individuals to drop out of school a second time. The study could provide insight on how to keep an individual engaged after they have re-enrolled so that they can ultimately earn their high school diploma.

**Closing Comments**

This interpretative phenomenological study on re-engaged youth provided insight into the thought process of the youth dropping out of school, re-enrolling into an independent study high school, staying re-engaged after enrolling, ultimately earning a high school diploma, and the an independent study high school provided them. The participants understood the importance of a high school diploma and the value that it would afford them in their lives. Further, the participants continually re-emphasized the importance of having a strong support system and being part of a school community that is welcoming and wants them on to be successful.

Relationships are vital to the success of the students. Any positive role model can impact the success of the student. Teachers, tutors, paraprofessional, the school secretary, the school administrator, a parent, or caring family member can all influence a student's decision to stay engaged in his/her learning or to disengage from it. The relationships that the students develop while in school can set them on a trajectory of success. There is power in the ability a caring adult has in encouraging and motivating a student may be feeling dejected, suffering, or neglected.

Furthermore, the school environment needs to be one that is warm and welcoming so that the students feel like they are wanted and that they are there for success. School leaders, community leaders, and students can collaborate with one another to create an atmosphere at the school that promotes learning, promotes school safety, and promotes a student first approach in learning. By collaborating and having all voices heard, the students will take pride in the fact that they attend the school, which in turn helps the student take ownership in his/her own learning.

Additionally, in order to truly impact equity and promote academic success for those at-risk of dropping out, all stakeholders (educational leaders, community leaders, policymakers, and

educators) must be willing to work with and focus on the individuals that feel neglected and disregarded. The stakeholders need to focus on a one size does not fit all approach instead of a one size fits all approach. By listening to and understanding the needs of the students, the schools can then create lessons and activities that are individualized and relevant. This in turn will create a situation in which the students are more engaged in their own learning and taking ownership of their education.

Most importantly, it is important that the stakeholders, particularly those who have the most impact on the success of the students, understand that change takes time; change will not happen overnight, rather it is a long series of process that builds upon itself until the end goal is reached. Stakeholders will need to collaborate and work with one another to ensure that the students, especially those at-risk of dropping out, have hope; that these students understand that they can succeed. By being the cheerleader, the mentor, and the educator, the students are receiving someone who is rooting for their success while providing the necessary emotional, academic, and verbal support.

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APPENDIX A

Permission to Use Alternative School Types

**Permissions** <permissions@ascd.org>                                     Sun, Jan 5, 2020 at 5:34 PM
To: "christopher.hoang@pepperdine.edu" <christopher.hoang@pepperdine.edu>

Dear Christopher:

In response to your request below, please consider this permission to adapt and use the referenced Educational Leadership article for your personal research purposes.  Should you include excerpts or cite content in a paper or some other report form, please credit the source accordingly.  If your research results in use of our content in a product or publication for commercial release, please contact me again to secure further rights to do so.

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Sincerely yours,

**KATY WOGEC** • Permissions Consultant for ASCD
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P 240-478-4788

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**From:** christopher.hoang@pepperdine.edu <christopher.hoang@pepperdine.edu>
**Sent:** Tuesday, December 31, 2019 8:34 PM
**To:** Permissions <permissions@ascd.org>
**Subject:** Contact Us - Obtain Permission to Reuse ASCD Material

Hello, I am a student at Pepperdine University in the process of writing my dissertation regarding alternative schools. I came across one of your articles: Alternative Schools: The State of the Art by Mary Anne Raywid in Educational Leadership Vole 52 Sept 1994. I was writing to inquire if I could get permission to adapt some of the information found in this article into a table format. I would write to Professor Raywid for permission, however, she passed away in 2010. Any insight would be greatly appreciated. Thank you, Chris

Full Name: Christopher Hoang

APPENDIX B

Written Recruitment (E-mail) Script

PEPPERDINE
— UNIVERSITY —

Dear Graduate:

My name is Christopher Hoang and I am a doctoral student in the Graduate School of

Education and Psychology at Pepperdine University. I am conducting a research study that aims

to understand re-engaged students that earned a high school diploma through an independent

study program. In order to be eligible for this study, you will need to meet the following criteria:

1.      Is at least 18 years of age

2.      Dropped out of high school before enrolling in an independent study high school

program.

3.      Attended an independent studies high school program in Southern California.

4.      Graduated from an independent study high school within the past five years.

5.      Selected to attend an independent study high school by choice, not because you

were expelled or referred to the independent study high school by your local high school.

If you meet these parameters, you are invited to participate. Included in this e-mail you

will find a link to the questionnaire. The questionnaire will take about 20 minutes to complete.

By completing the questionnaire, you are eligible for a chance at a $25 Amazon gift card that

will be raffled at the end of August 2020.

Based on your answers to these questions, you may be asked to participate further in the

study through an interview with me where we can further discuss your high school experiences.

Interviews can be conducted in person or through the internet via Zoom or Skype based on a time and day that is convenient for you. Interviews are expected to last between 60 to 90 minutes. Interviews will be audio taped. If you are selected and participate in the interview, you will be eligible for a chance at an additional $25 Amazon gift card that will be raffled by the end of December 2020 that is different from the one for completing the questionnaire. If you are the winner of the raffle, you will be notified by e-mail.

Participation is voluntary. Please know that if you choose to participate, your answers will remain confidential. If you have any questions, you may contact me through phone at xxx-xxxx or through e-mail at Christopher.hoang@pepperdine.edu.

Thank you in advance for your participation,

Christopher Hoang
Pepperdine University
Doctoral Student

APPENDIX C

Letter of Informed Consent for Participation in Research Activities

**PEPPERDINE**
— UNIVERSITY —

IRB#: 20-02-1291

Exploration of Independent Study Programs in Supporting Re-engaged Students to Earn a High
School Diploma

**Authorized Study Personnel:**

**Principal Investigator:** Christopher A. Hoang, MA    Cell: xxx-xxxx

If you agree to participate in this study, the project will involve:

- Males and Females between the ages of 18 to 24.

- Procedures will include an interview either in person or virtually through Skype or Zoom.

- There will be one interview conducted, with the possibility for follow up questions at a later time.

- The interview will take approximately 1 to 2 hours.

- There are minimal risks associated with this study.

- You will be entered into a raffle for a $25 Amazon gift card for your participation in the interview.

- You will be provided a copy of this consent form.

- Your participation is voluntary, and you may decide not to participate at any time

Thank you for your interest in this study. As you are aware from the introduction communication, my name is Christopher Hoang, and I am a doctoral student at Pepperdine University.

Please consider this information carefully before deciding whether to participate in this research.

**Purpose of the research:** To understand the experiences of dropping out of high school, re-enrolling into an independent study high school, and earning a high school diploma.

**Why are you being asked to be in this research study:** You are being asked to be in this study because you enrolled in an independent study high school after dropping out and then you graduated from an independent study high school earning a high school diploma within the past five years.

**What is the reason for doing this research:** There is limited to no information regarding students who dropped out of high school, enrolled in an independent study high school, and graduate from an independent study high school.

**What you will do in this research:** If you decide to volunteer, you will be asked to complete an online questionnaire which will take approximately 15 minutes with the possibility of participating in one interview. You will be asked several questions. Some of them will be about your experience with the event of dropping out of high school. Others will be about your experience with returning to school to eventually earn a high school diploma. With your permission, I will audio record the interviews and will also take notes during the interview session.

**Time required:** The questionnaire will take approximately 15 minutes. The interview will take approximately 1 to 2 hours.

**How will your data be used:** Your responses will be used and analyzed to gain a better understanding of the benefits and constraints of an independent study high school. It will also be utilized to understand your motivation in re-engaging in your academics after previously dropping out.

**Benefits to you:** You have the possibility of winning a $25 Amazon gift card. However, you may not get any benefit from being in this research study.

**Benefits to others:** This study may be valuable to teachers, principals, and district administrators in creating informed decisions for interventions on preventing high school dropouts and recovering students that have already dropped out.

**Risks:** Some of the questions may cause emotional discomfort, issues with self-efficacy or self-esteem, boredom and possible negative self-reflection.

**What will being in this research study cost you:** There is no cost to you to be in this research study.

**Compensation:** You have the possibility of winning a $25 Amazon gift card.

**What should you do if you have a problem during this research study:** Your welfare is a major concern of every member of the research team. If you have a problem as a direct result of being in this study, you should immediately contact one of the people listed at the beginning of this consent form.

**Confidentiality:** Reasonable steps will be taken to protect your privacy and the confidentiality of your study data. At no time will your actual identity be revealed. You will be assigned a random numerical code. Anyone who helps me transcribe responses will only know you by this code. Your responses to questionnaire and the interview questions will be kept confidential. The data will be stored in a locked cabinet in the investigator's office and will only be seen by the research team during the study and for three years after the study is complete, at which time, the data will be destroyed. Audio recordings will be uploaded and kept secured on a personal computer in a locked and secure location where only the researcher has a key to. The data will be destroyed 3 years after the research is completed.

The only persons who will have access to your research records are the study personnel, the Institutional Review Board (IRB), and any other person, agency, or sponsor as required by law. Findings from the study may be presented to professional audiences and/or published; however, at no time will information that identifies you will be released.

**Your rights:** You may ask any questions concerning this research and have those questions answered before agreeing to participate in or during the study.

For study related questions, please contact the investigator listed at the beginning of this form.

For questions concerning your rights or complaints about the research contact the Institutional Review Board (IRB):

- Phone: 1-310-568-2305
- E-mail: gpsirb@pepperdine.edu

**Participation and withdrawal:** You can decide not to be in this research study, or you can stop being in this research study ("withdraw") at any time before, during, or after the research begins for any reason. Deciding not to be in this research study or deciding to withdraw will not affect your relationship with the investigator or with Pepperdine University.

You will not lose any benefits to which you are entitled.

**Agreement:** You are voluntarily making a decision whether or not to be in this research study. Signing this form means that (1) you have read and understood this consent form, (2) you have had the consent form explained to you, (3) you have had your questions answered, and (4) you have decided to be in the research study. You will be given a copy of this consent form to keep. The nature and purpose of this research have been sufficiently explained and I agree to participate in this study. I understand that I am free to withdraw at any time.

**Participant Feedback Survey:** To meet Pepperdine University's ongoing accreditation efforts and to meet the Accreditation of Human Research Protection Programs (AAHRPP) standards, an online feedback survey is included below:

    https://forms.gle/nnRgRwLgajYzBq5t7

Participant's Signature: _____ Date: _____

Participant's Name (print):_____

To contact the researcher: If you have any questions or concerns about this research, please contact Christopher Hoang at xxx-xxxx or christopher.hoang@pepperdine.edu. You may also contact the dissertation chairperson, Dr. Reyna Garcia-Ramos at reyna.g.ramos@pepperdine.edu.

**Investigator certification:** My signature certifies that all elements of informed consent described on this consent form have been explained fully to the subject. In my judgement, the participant possesses the capacity to give informed consent to participate in this research and is voluntarily and knowingly giving informed consent to participant.


Signature of Person Obtaining Consent: _____ Date: _____

APPENDIX D

Semi-Structured Interview Script

Date/Time:
Location of Interview:

Good afternoon/evening. My name is Christopher Hoang and I am a doctoral student at Pepperdine University, and my study is the exploration of re-engaged students that earned a high school diploma through an independent study program. Thank you for taking the time to meet with me to discuss your experience of dropping out of high school, re-enrolling in an independent study, and graduating with a high school diploma. I will be asking you a range of questions pertaining to your background, your experiences before dropping out, your experiences re-enrolling, and your experiences during schooling as you progressed towards earning your high school diploma. I will be recording our conversation and taking notes during our session. We will only use first names here. No reports will link what you say to your name, teacher, or school. By doing this, we will be maintaining your confidentiality.
During the interview, I would appreciate for you to answer as honestly and comprehensively as you see fit to answer the question. If for any reason any of the questions are uncomfortable, we can come back to it later if you so choose. If at any time you would like to take a break, please let me know. Further, if at any time you would like to stop the interview let me know and we will stop the interview. You are here voluntarily, and I appreciate your time.

Demographic Questions:
1. What is your age?
2. Could you describe your family life?
3. How many high schools have you attended?
4. How many years were you enrolled in high school?
5. How many years were you enrolled in an independent study high school?
6. Which independent study high school did you attend?
7. In what year did you graduate from high school?
8. Could you please describe your current occupation?

Factors that led a dropout to return to a high school:
1. Prior to enrolling and graduating from [name of independent study high school], what was going on in your life that led you to dropping out of your previous school?
2. What made you decide to return to school?

Factors that led a re-engaged youth to stay in school and graduate:
1. What kept you going after you re-enrolled in school to earn the high school diploma?
2. How were you influenced by others to stay engaged in school after re-enrolling?
3. How would you describe your feelings and beliefs about returning to high school?
4. Have you ever been in a position where you felt stuck? What did you do to not feel stuck?
5. How difficult did you find it to keep pursuing and accomplishing your goals? Why?
6. What challenges did you encounter after re-enrolling? How did you overcome them?
7. Do you feel like you can handle any situation that comes your way? Why or why not?

Factors that led to enrolling in an independent study high school:
1. What made you decide to attend an independent study high school?
2. What high school(s) did you attend prior to the independent study high school?
3. What is an independent study school?
4. What is the experience(s) like at an independent study school?
5. Could you explain to me what makes independent study different from your previous high school?
6. What do classes look like in an independent study school?
7. What helped you be successful in independent study?
8. What helped keep you engaged in independent study?
9. What challenges did you face in independent study?
10. If you had the option to start high school over, would you go to an independent study school? Why or why not?

Possible follow-up questions:
1. How did returning to school make you feel?
2. If you could have done anything differently, what would that be?
3. Do you have anything you would like to share regarding your experiences as you earned your high school diploma?

At this point, I would like to conclude the interview and thank you for your time.

APPENDIX E

Generalized Self-Efficacy Questionnaire

Demographic Questions:
1. What is your name?
2. What is your e-mail address?

Self-Efficacy Questions:
1. What do you do when you are confronted by a difficult problem?
2. How confident are you in dealing with issues that arise unexpectedly? Why?
3. When confronted by a new challenge, do you continue to take on the challenge until you master it, or do you stop at a certain point? Why?
4. Do you believe that most of your problems or challenges can be solved with enough effort? Why or why not?
5. What do you do when you are faced with a difficult task that frustrates you?
6. When presented with a problem, how do you go about solving it?

APPENDIX F

Permission to Use General Self-Efficacy Scale

Freie Universität Berlin

Freie Universität Berlin, Gesundheitspsychologie (PF 10),
Habelschwerdter Allee 45, 14195 Berlin, Germany

Fachbereich Erziehungs-
wissenschaft und Psychologie
- Gesundheitspsychologie -

Professor Dr. Ralf Schwarzer
Habelschwerdter Allee 45
14195 Berlin, Germany

Fax      +49 30 838 55634
health@zedat.fu-berlin.de
www.fu-berlin.de/gesund

**Permission granted**

to use the General Self-Efficacy Scale for non-commercial reseach and
development purposes. The scale may be shortened and/or modified to meet the
particular requirements of the research context.

http://userpage.fu-berlin.de/~health/selfscal.htm

You may print an unlimited number of copies on paper for distribution to research
participants. Or the scale may be used in online survey research if the user group
is limited to certified users who enter the website with a password.

There is no permission to publish the scale in the Internet, or to print it in
publications (except 1 sample item).

The source needs to be cited, the URL mentioned above as well as the book
publication:

Schwarzer, R., & Jerusalem, M. (1995). Generalized Self-Efficacy scale. In J. Weinman,
S. Wright, & M. Johnston, *Measures in health psychology: A user's portfolio. Causal and
control beliefs* (pp.35-37). Windsor, UK: NFER-NELSON.

Professor Dr. Ralf Schwarzer
www.ralfschwarzer.de

APPENDIX G

IRB Permission

PEPPERDINE

Pepperdine University
24255 Pacific Coast Highway
Malibu, CA 90263
TEL: 310-506-4000

## NOTICE OF APPROVAL FOR HUMAN RESEARCH

Date: March 25, 2020

Protocol Investigator Name: Christopher Hoang

Protocol #: 20-02-1291

Project Title: Exploration of Independent Study Programs in Supporting Re-engaged Students to Earn a High School Diploma

School: Graduate School of Education and Psychology

Dear Christopher Hoang:

Thank you for submitting your application for exempt review to Pepperdine University's Institutional Review Board (IRB). We appreciate the work you have done on your proposal. The IRB has reviewed your submitted IRB application and all ancillary materials. Upon review, the IRB has determined that the above entitled project meets the requirements for exemption under the federal regulations 45 CFR 46.101 that govern the protections of human subjects.

Your research must be conducted according to the proposal that was submitted to the IRB. If changes to the approved protocol occur, a revised protocol must be reviewed and approved by the IRB before implementation. For any proposed changes in your research protocol, please submit an amendment to the IRB. Since your study falls under exemption, there is no requirement for continuing IRB review of your project. Please be aware that changes to your protocol may prevent the research from qualifying for exemption from 45 CFR 46.101 and require submission of a new IRB application or other materials to the IRB.

A goal of the IRB is to prevent negative occurrences during any research study. However, despite the best intent, unforeseen circumstances or events may arise during the research. If an unexpected situation or adverse event happens during your investigation, please notify the IRB as soon as possible. We will ask for a complete written explanation of the event and your written response. Other actions also may be required depending on the nature of the event. Details regarding the timeframe in which adverse events must be reported to the IRB and documenting the adverse event can be found in the *Pepperdine University Protection of Human Participants in Research: Policies and Procedures Manual* at community.pepperdine.edu/irb.

Please refer to the protocol number denoted above in all communication or correspondence related to your application and this approval. Should you have additional questions or require clarification of the contents of this letter, please contact the IRB Office. On behalf of the IRB, I wish you success in this scholarly pursuit.
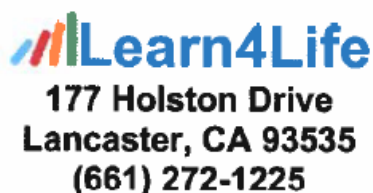
Sincerely,

Judy Ho, Ph.D., IRB Chair

cc: Mrs. Katy Carr, Assistant Provost for Research

APPENDIX H

Permission to Use Learn 4 Life's Data

**Learn4Life**
**177 Holston Drive**
**Lancaster, CA 93535**
**(661) 272-1225**

January 19, 2020

Mr. Christopher Hoang, Assistant Principal
Gardena, Inglewood, and Lincoln

Dear Mr. Hoang,

Thank you for the copy of your chapter and your request. You are approved to seek internal data and do interviews according to the plan you have outlined in your chapter which shows an appropriate plan for FERPA compliance and the safeguarding of students' identities and personal information.

Please provide me with a closing report on any challenges you faced getting access to data and with a copy of your completed dissertation for our files once it is complete. I am copying Michelle VanKirk and Julie Parra to notify them that this project has been approved. I am copying Andria Vega so that she will store this email documentation of your approval and a copy of your chapter for our records.

Thank you for choosing to study our program as part of the fulfillment of your doctoral requirements.

Sincerely,

Caprice Young

**Caprice Young, Ed.D.**
**National Superintendent**
177 Holston Drive | Lancaster, CA 93534
O 661.272.1225 C 661.524.4509
Learn4Life.org