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Manuscripts should follow the guidelines of the Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association (6th ed.). Manuscripts should not exceed 25 typed, double-spaced, consecutively numbered pages, including all cited references and illustrative materials. Submitted manuscripts that do not follow APA referencing will be returned to the author without editorial review. Tables should be typed in APA format. Placement of any illustrative materials (tables, charts, figures, graphs, etc.) should be clearly

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# Preliminary Analysis of an Instructional Alternative to Exclusionary Discipline

Rhonda N. T. Nese, Eoin Bastable, Cody Gion, Michelle Massar, Joseph F. T. Nese, and Connor McCroskey

**Abstract:** Decades of research have shown that exclusionary discipline practices are not only ineffective for changing student behavior, they lead to worse social, behavioral, and academic outcomes for students. This article explores the findings from a pilot study of the Inclusive Skill-Building Learning Approach (ISLA), an instructional alternative to exclusionary discipline practices. The purposes of ISLA are to improve student social and behavioral problem-solving, teacher and administrator practices, and student-teacher relationships while also reducing lost instructional time for student excluded from their learning environment. Results from the pilot indicated that implementation of ISLA was associated with reductions in exclusionary discipline practices (Cohen's  $h$  effect sizes ranged from .06 to .18 across schools and outcomes), and a substantial decrease in instructional minutes lost (~ 92%). Educational staff also reported favorable impressions of the intervention. Practical and conceptual implications, limitations of this study, and directions for future research are further discussed.

Over the past 20 years, researchers have been demonstrating the widespread and direct negative impact of exclusionary discipline (e.g., office discipline referrals, suspension, and expulsion) on individual students, schools, and society (Skiba, 2014; Zabel, 1986). Despite the robust body of evidence pointing to the detrimental effects of exclusionary discipline, schools continue to become more reliant on these practices as a response to problematic student behavior (Losen, Ee, Hodson, & Martinez, 2015; Losen & Gillespie, 2012; Zabel, 1986). Furthermore, the result of the overuse of exclusionary discipline is a cyclical series of removals which directly affects student educational experiences and has a rippling effect on the school systems and society (Dishion & Snyder, 2016).

## Negative Impact on Students

Often, exclusionary discipline amplifies the risk of negative outcomes for individual students (American Academy of Pediatrics Council on School Health, 2013; Noltemeyer, Ward, & Mcloughlin, 2015). Researchers have found that students who experience exclusion for behavioral infractions are more likely to experience lower academic achievement (Arcia, 2006), further discipline involvement (Mendez, 2003), and future juvenile justice involvement (Fabelo et al., 2011). They are also more likely to be suspended in the future, retained, and/or drop out of school (Marchbanks et al., 2014).

There is substantial evidence that exclusionary discipline is administered more often to students from diverse backgrounds. Inequities based on race, disability status, gender, SES, academic achievement, and sexual orientation have been documented (Skiba, 2014). It has been suggested that the disproportionate use of these practices may be contributing significantly to the achievement gaps we see for these groups (Gregory, Skiba, & Noguera, 2010). Moreover, inequitable

and ineffective consequences resulting in student removal results in collateral damage for the entire school community, as indicated by research noting low academic achievement and reports of school safety issues even among students who have never been suspended (American Psychological Academy, 2008).

## Negative Impact on Schools and Society

There is a common misconception that even though exclusionary discipline may not be effective for changing individual student behavior, removal of the student from the educational environment is necessary to improve the quality of education for other students (American Psychological Academy, 2008). This does not seem to be the case. Schools with high rates of exclusionary discipline have lower academic quality (Perry & Morris, 2014) and poorer school climates (Mitchell & Bradshaw, 2013) than schools with lower rates of exclusion. Teachers who overuse exclusionary discipline feel more emotionally exhausted and less efficacious in their ability to manage student behaviors (Reinke, Herman, & Stormont, 2013). Students in classrooms where reactive exclusionary discipline practices are used frequently report that their school is more disorderly and unsafe than students in classrooms that use proactive approaches (Mitchell & Bradshaw, 2013).

The overuse of exclusionary discipline is such a large problem that the American Academy of Pediatrics Council on School Health (2013) issued a policy statement outlining the severity of the issue and the call for increased use of preventive strategies and alternatives. The policy statement suggests that even though exclusion is widely used, it does not seem to be a viable option from an economic perspective. Society benefits from individuals who are educated and contributing citizens. Because exclusionary discipline

contributes to lower levels of academic achievement and higher levels of incarceration for youth, it is extremely costly (Marchbanks et al., 2014). In addition, incarceration and restrictive placements are much more costly than alternatives that result in less restrictive and intensive support (Christie, 2004).

### Current Typical Practice

Extensive research documents the detrimental effects of exclusionary discipline, particularly for already marginalized or at-risk students, and policy has reflected the need for a response. The 2001 No Child Left Behind regulations required schools to decrease use of suspension and expulsion, and the 2015 Every Student Succeeds Act includes provisions for states and school districts to reduce the overuse of exclusionary discipline practices. In response, many schools and districts have implemented Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS) as a way to prevent and deter problem behaviors. A wealth of empirical research conducted over the last 20 years documents the positive effects of implementing PBIS on student academic and behavioral outcomes and organizational health. Specifically, PBIS has been associated with decreases in behavior referrals (Bradshaw, Mitchell, & Leaf, 2010) and increases in academic achievement (McIntosh, Bennett, & Price, 2011), students' social and emotional competencies (Bradshaw et al., 2012), and school safety (Horner et al., 2009). With its emphasis on preventive strategies, such as teaching, modeling, and reinforcing appropriate behaviors rather than waiting for misbehavior to occur before responding, PBIS provides multiple effective strategies for preventing the escalation of problem behaviors and for defining systems for effective classroom behavior management. PBIS is delivered through three tiers of support—universal, targeted, and intensive (Sugai, Horner, & Lewis, 2009; Tilly, 2008; Walker, Horner et al., 1996)—in which the universal prevention level targets all students to optimize academic and social functioning and prevent challenges. The targeted level focuses on the use of additional evidence-based practices for students who struggle but for whom highly individualized support is not necessary. The intensive level supports students with the most significant needs, often in a 1:1 format. The driving principle behind PBIS is that the provision of preventive support to all students occurs as a first step because it is most efficient and effective and it allows students with additional needs to be provided supports without the cost of screening systems, danger of misidentification, and stigma of labeling (Fuchs, Mock, Morgan, & Young, 2003; Walker et al., 1996).

Although PBIS provides distinct promise for reducing the use of exclusionary discipline and has

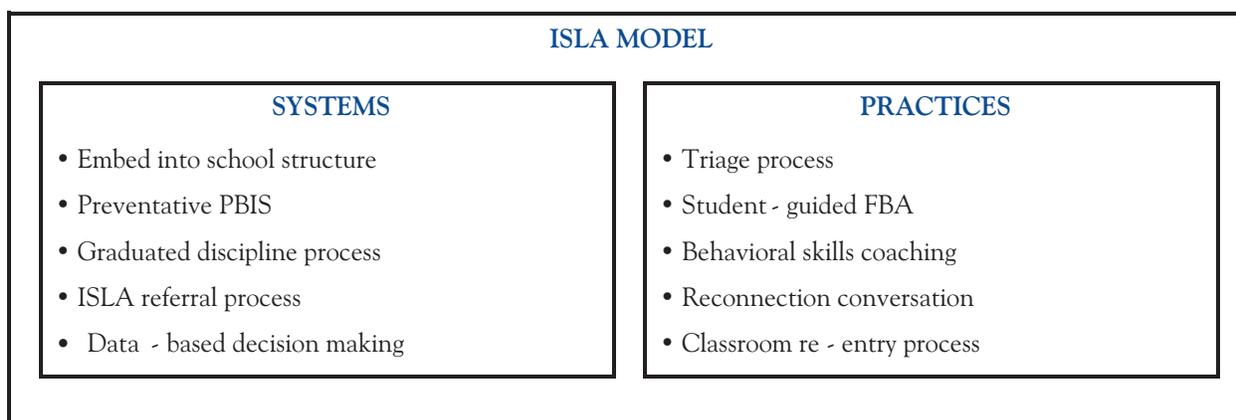
been associated with decreased discipline referral rates in secondary education (Flannery, Fenning, McGrath Kato, & McIntosh, 2014), there is still need for additional programs and systems within PBIS that specifically address the needs of students when they are sent out of class. Most typically in middle and high schools around the country, a student is sent out of class (or the cafeteria or the hallway) for a behavioral infraction. The student walks to the office, where that student waits for a prolonged period of time to meet with an administrator. The student then meets with the administrator and, as a consequence, is sent to a space within the school where the student cannot disrupt learning (nor can the student access it). This space is often shared with other students who violated a school rule. In this confined space, there is little to no support for lost instruction, appropriate classroom behaviors, ways to reconnect and make amends with the teacher, or the appropriate process for re-entering the classroom. This process offers no remediation for students or teachers, exacerbating academic deficiencies, problem behaviors, and recidivism rates (Skiba & Rausch, 2006).

There are a few current practices targeting support for specific at-risk subgroups of students, including mentorship programs, policies that place students in behavior support classes, or behavior support programs (Christenson, Stout, & Pohl, 2012). Although some of these targeted interventions have been shown to have promise, they are designed to be implemented with only a small number of students already identified as at-risk of school failure (Cauley & Jovanovich, 2006; Neild, 2009; Sinclair, Christenson, & Thurlow, 2005), and they can require substantial school resources (staff time for student screening, implementation, and monitoring of student progress) or restructuring (pull-out classes). Targeted interventions such as these are also most successful when they are implemented in conjunction with a preventive PBIS system (Baker, Fien, & Baker, 2010).

In sum, PBIS is a theoretically sound foundation for classroom management, prevention, use of instruction, and function-based use of consequences. However, even with existing PBIS systems, there are still too many students (especially middle and high school students) who are removed from class, languish in disciplinary limbo even if they ultimately return to class, and/or end up suspended or expelled. Teachers, administrators, and students need alternatives to extended class removal that still allow (a) instruction to continue and (b) students to receive support that results in practical behavior change.

**Inclusive Skill-Building Learning Approach (ISLA)** The Inclusive Skill-Building Learning Approach (ISLA; Nese,

Figure 1. ISLA Two - Component Model



2016) is designed to improve student behavior, improve student-teacher relationships, and reduce exclusionary discipline practices and subsequent lost instructional time. This is accomplished through a two-component model: 1) systems to support implementation and 2) instructional practices to build student behavioral skills. Figure 1 clarifies the elements within each component, which are further discussed.

#### Systems to support implementation.

Intervention practices do not stand alone but need to be embedded in the organizational context of the school (Fixsen, Naoom, Blase, Friedman, & Wallace, 2005). Therefore, implementing and sustaining ISLA requires that practices be connected to the school as a whole and have systems to support it. Further, PBIS uses a team to focus on articulating successful practices and systems through a review of data, alignment with current initiatives, and sharing and gathering feedback from the school staff and leaders (Sugai & Horner, 2009). These preventive models have been shown to be successful at improving students' academic achievement (McIntosh et al., 2011), social and emotional competencies (Bradshaw et al., 2012), and school safety (Horner et al., 2009) and in decreasing behavior referrals, suspensions, and expulsions (Bradshaw et al., 2010). ISLA expands on the system of PBIS by providing training and support for all staff members on preventive strategies that are utilized across the school system, from the classroom to the front office, to minimize the use of exclusion, respond effectively to problem behaviors, and establish systematic processes to ensure that students are equitably supported through the discipline process.

To support implementation, ISLA uses preventive PBIS that is focused on achieving positive outcomes for all students and embeds all ISLA supports within existing practices within schools. Research has shown systems-level components need to be present for universal interventions to be implemented consistently

(Flannery et al., 2013), and ISLA is grounded in the PBIS framework, which has over 20 years of supporting research and practice. PBIS, implemented in over 20,000 schools across the country, provides a framework for schools to implement evidence-based interventions as they supply (a) systems needed for initial and sustained implementation, (b) guidance in the selection and implementation of practices that match the needs of the school, and (c) systems for using data to identify areas of concern and guide decision-making regarding interventions (Sugai & Horner, 2009). The use of these system-focused components decreases the need for intensive technical assistance, builds capacity within the school to increase fidelity of implementation, and increases the likelihood of sustainability (McIntosh et al., 2013).

As part of ISLA, all school staff are retrained on classroom behavior management strategies and a process of graduated discipline in an effort to reduce the number of students sent out of class. Graduated discipline systems reserve exclusionary discipline for the most serious behavior incidents, which can be operationally defined for educators. A system of discipline that is graduated ensures that less serious behavior incidents are met with milder responses rather than punitive consequences. Examples of graduated responses include reteaching and redirection, restitution, counseling, parent contact, and behavioral contracts. When behavior incidents are deemed too severe to be handled in the classroom, staff use a structured process to refer the students to the office. This process includes the completion of a behavior referral, the provision of an academic assignment on which the student receives support, and a phone call to inform guardians of the removal of the student from class.

**Instructional practices to build student behavior skills.** Social skills development is a critical component of interventions for youth with behavior problems

(Gresham, 2002; Gresham et al., 2004). Students who lack adequate social skills often have unsuccessful or negative peer relations and interactions with adults (Dishion et al., 1991; Dodge, 2000) and tend to spend time with other students who engage in problem behaviors (Dishion, Poulin, & Burraston, 2001; Dodge, 2000). Several research-based programs aimed at preventing behavior and conduct problems have included a behavioral-skill-building component (Botvin, 2000; Chamberlain, 2003; Gresham, 2002). One-on-one mentoring (in which an older peer or adult guides youth toward prosocial endeavors by direct instruction, modeling appropriate behavior, and serving as a confident and older advisor) is a common component of preventive interventions aimed at increasing youth skills and competencies. Previous researchers have shown that youth who have worked with mentors exhibit better outcomes than those youth who have not worked with mentors (Buchanan, Nese, & Clark, 2016; Philip & Hendry, 1996). Effective social skills coaching targets the development and refinement of positive adaptive behaviors and reinforcement of prosocial skill use (Gresham, 2002).

Within the ISLA intervention, students receive immediate coaching and support when they exhibit problem behavior that requires removal from the classroom environment. A five-step process, conducted by an educational support staff member (e.g., educational assistants, behavioral support staff), is utilized to provide students with behavioral support when they receive a behavior referral for problem behavior. The educational support staff member designated for behavior support conducts a student-guided functional behavioral assessment (FBA) to get a better understanding of the problem that occurred and the student's perception of what happened. The staff member then helps the

student identify an appropriate replacement behavior for the issue that occurred and practices the behavioral skill with the student until the student develops the behavioral skill needed to be successful in the classroom. In instances when damage was done, the staff member and the student complete a restitution plan to repair the damage. The staff member and the student then complete a guided Reconnection Conversation Card to be placed in the teacher's mailbox and rehearse the conversation to prepare the student for reentry into the classroom. Finally, the student is escorted back to class and supported through the Reconnection Conversation with the teacher. This process has been developed to provide immediate support to the student and to be time efficient, a contrast with current practices. A comparison of typical discipline practice to ISLA practices is shown in Figure 2.

**Purpose Statement**

The damaging impact of exclusionary discipline on the outcomes of students has been well documented in the literature, yet its overuse persists. The use of exclusionary discipline is often a result of school personnel lacking adequate supports and training to effectively address problem behaviors and students needing behavioral skills instruction to be successful in class. ISLA aims to address this gap in support by delivering a model that (a) focuses on teacher and administrator strategies for addressing problem behaviors in the classroom setting, (b) incorporates a systematic, graduated discipline process, (c) delivers instructional supports for students sent out of class, and (d) provides re-entry supports for transitioning students back to class in an efficient and restorative manner. Utilizing these four components has the potential to strengthen the use of classroom management practices, improve student behavior, improve student-teacher relationships, and reduce the

Figure 2. Comparison of Current Typical Discipline Practice to ISLA Practices

Current Typical Discipline Practice	ISLA Practice
1. Student engages in problem behavior	1. Student engages in problem behavior
2. Student sent to the principal's office	2. Student sent to the behavior support room
3. Student waits to receive consequence (e.g., detention, a call home, a talking to, ISS, OSS)	3. Student receives immediate behavioral support in the form of a student-guided FBA and targeted behavioral skills coaching.
4. Student receives consequence	4. Reconnection conversation is conducted to prepare the student for a return to the classroom environment.
5. Student sent back to class or removed from the school environment	5. Student is escorted back to class and support is provided to restore the relationship with the classroom teacher

use of exclusionary discipline and lost instructional time for students at risk of school failure.

The purpose of this study is to examine the impact of the ISLA model during a pilot implementation year in two middle schools. Mixed methods data were collected on the use of exclusion; the amount of instructional time lost for students sent out of class; and staff member perceptions of the intervention, its effectiveness at reducing problem behaviors and improving student skills, and its fit within the school culture.

## Method

### Participants and Settings

Two public middle schools in the Pacific Northwest that serve students in Grade 6 through Grade 8 participated in this pilot study. School 1 is located in a suburban community and had an enrollment of 604 students during the 2015–16 school year. Approximately 85% of the students in School 1 qualified for Free and/or Reduced Lunch, 43% of the students identified as Students of Color, and the school received Title I supports. School 2 is located in a rural community and had an enrollment of 530 students during the 2015–16 school year. Approximately 68% of the students in School 2 qualified for Free and/or Reduced Lunch, 15% of the students identified as Students of Color, and the school did not receive Title I supports. Both schools had been implementing PBIS for a minimum of two years prior to training and implementation on ISLA and had identified the reduction of exclusionary discipline as one of their priorities for the following school year.

### Data Collection Procedures

Multiple sources of data were collected during the ISLA study to examine the extent to which the intervention (a) was related to a reduction in student problem behavior, (b) was related to a decrease in instructional minutes lost, (c) was delivered as intended, and (d) was perceived as a feasible and socially valid intervention.

**School-wide information system.** Data related to student problem behavior were collected from a web-based data collection system known as the School-Wide Information System (SWIS; May et al., 2013). To track incidences of problem behavior in the SWIS, schools entered office discipline referral (ODR) information as well as the type of exclusionary discipline practice taken (i.e., in-school suspension, out-of-school suspension, expulsion). For the purposes of this study, preintervention and postintervention data on major ODR counts and exclusionary discipline practices were collected and analyzed.

**Office discipline referrals.** SWIS categorizes ODR behavior infractions into two categories. Minor ODRs are nonserious, low-intensity behaviors such as defiance,

disruption, and inappropriate language (Todd, Horner, & Tobin, 2010). Major ODRs indicate student behavior that is more serious, dangerous, or intense than a minor behavior violation (Gion, McIntosh, & Horner, 2014). Major ODRs may include behavioral incidents such as physical aggression, fighting, and theft. For this study, only major ODRs were collected and analyzed.

**Exclusionary discipline practices.** Schools can track three types of exclusionary discipline practices in SWIS: (a) in-school suspension (ISS), (b) out-of-school suspension (OSS), and (c) expulsion. Time in ISS is a consequence that typically involves removing students from the instructional setting but providing them with an instructive, structured environment on school grounds. OSS is often used in response to a serious problem behavior. The American Academy of Pediatrics' Council on School Health (2013) recommends that OSS be reserved for situations that include the risk of real and perceived threats to the safety of the student or others. Expulsion is the most severe form of exclusionary discipline and is used less frequently than ISS and OSS.

**Instructional minutes lost.** The sum of minutes of instructional time lost was tracked across all students sent out of class each week. Instructional time lost included any time lost due to out-of-class behavior referrals, regardless of whether they resulted in an OSS, ISS, or detention. To collect data on lost instructional time, a secure Google Docs electronic tracking document where students were tracked from the time the out-of-class behavior referral was written until the time they returned to class was provided to each building.

**Staff survey.** Every staff member who utilized the ISLA room during the study was asked to complete a survey designed to measure the feasibility and social validity of the intervention. The lead author adapted the Primary Intervention Rating Scale: Teacher Version (PIRS; Lane, Robertson, & Wehby, 2002), a brief, individual-completed rating scale designed to assess social validity of universal interventions. The PIRS contained 17 questions on a six-point Likert scale, with 1 representing Strongly Disagree through 6 representing Strongly Agree. Lane and colleagues' (2009) examination of the reliability and structural validity of PIRS scores indicated that the PIRS is a one-factor instrument explaining approximately 70% of the variance at each school level (elementary, middle, and high) with strong internal consistency estimates of .97 (elementary), .98 (middle), and .97 (high).

**Staff focus group.** School staff members were asked to participate in a focus group to collect qualitative data regarding the perception of the effectiveness and feasibility of the ISLA intervention after implementation

was complete. Seven staff members at School 2 participated in the focus group that was facilitated by the lead author, including the ISLA facilitator, one 6th-grade math and science teacher, one 6th-grade language arts teacher, one 6th-grade physical education teacher, one 7th- and one 8th-grade science teacher, one 8th-grade math teacher, and one building-level administrator. During the focus group, staff members were asked a variety of questions, including (a) the perceptions of ISS and OSS prior to implementing the ISLA intervention, (b) the extent to which the students who received OSS or other exclusionary disciplinary practices prior to the intervention had improved their behavior, (c) the extent to which staff members perceived students as receiving the five core components of the ISLA intervention, (d) the core component that was perceived as most effective, (e) the skills or knowledge that students had learned as a result of the intervention, (f) suggestions for improvement and increased efficiency of the ISLA intervention, (g) how the ISLA ISS data were being used to target more intensive supports for students with recurring behavior infractions, and (h) general overall impressions of the successes associated with the ISLA intervention. The focus group discussion was recorded and transcribed and is summarized anonymously.

#### Intervention Fidelity and Interobserver Agreement

To determine the extent to which the ISLA intervention was delivered as intended, fidelity of ISLA implementation data were collected via direct observation. The ISLA Curriculum Observation Fidelity Tool was developed by the lead author to measure the extent to which students in ISS were receiving the five core components of the intervention, including: (a) student-guided function-based assessment (FBA), (b) behavioral skills coaching, (c) reconnection conversation practice, (d) reconnection card development, and (e) classroom reentry support. Three graduate students were trained to collect data during 30-minute observation sessions. When one of the components of the intervention was observed, that component was coded as “delivered.” An average percentage of fidelity was calculated for each component by dividing the number of occasions a component was delivered by the total number of possible opportunities to deliver the component, multiplied by 100. Across the two schools, mean fidelity for student-guided FBA was 100%, Behavioral Skills Coaching was 88.9%, Reconnection Conversation Practice was 77.8%, Reconnection Conversation Card was 77.8%, and Classroom Reentry Support was 66.7%. Additionally, interobserver agreement data (IOA) were collected on 40% of 42 total observation sessions, whereby two trained observers would independently code the sessions and then data were compared to determine if agreement

was established across each of the five components. IOA remained above the 80% criteria for each component throughout the duration of the study, with 89% total agreement on implementation at School 1 and 98% total agreement on implementation at School 2.

#### Procedures

**Training on effective classroom management.** Before the start of the 2015–2016 school year, the lead author, district PBIS coach, and PBIS team at each middle school provided a training on classroom behavior management strategies to the entire staff. Classroom-managed versus office-managed problem behaviors were clarified, including the graduated discipline system developed by the PBIS teams, and group consensus was gathered on reserving exclusion for only the most serious of behavior incidents. For instances in need of exclusion, staff members were trained on how to utilize cross-class time-outs (a maximum of 15 minutes, in the classroom directly across the hall, and students needed to be sent with an academic assignment to work on), and the appropriate process for sending students to the office (with a behavior referral, an academic assignment, and a phone call to inform guardians).

**Training on ISLA.** School staff were also informed about the ISLA process, the supports students would be receiving if they were sent out of class, and what they should expect when students transition back to class (reconnection conversation, reconnection card, how to engage in the reconnection with students). In addition, the lead author provided two trainings (one initial training in August and one follow-up refresher in January) on the ISLA intervention to the ISLA facilitator assigned to the ISS room and the building administrators. They were trained on the triage process for when students arrive to the office, as well as the critical steps of the student-guided FBA, behavioral skills coaching, reconnection conversation and reconnection card, and the classroom reentry process.

#### Data Analyses

Descriptive results were analyzed preintervention and postintervention for students who received major office discipline referrals (e.g., for more serious behavioral incidents such as physical aggression, fighting, and theft) and exclusionary discipline practices (OSS, ISS, expulsion) during the 2014–15 and 2015–16 school years. To facilitate the interpretations of the results, we report Cohen's  $h$  (1988), an effect size statistic for pre/post ISLA comparison of proportions of the following outcomes: OSS, ISS, ODR, and expulsion. Effect size estimates are a simple and robust way of quantifying group or pre/post differences, allowing the magnitude of the difference and its practical significance to be more readily understood.

Additionally, data were collected at both schools to assess the amount of instructional minutes lost due to exclusionary discipline pre/post ISLA intervention. Data were also collected on staff social validity ratings of the ISLA intervention via the PIRS, and comments from a one-hour staff focus group were gathered at School 2 to identify how staff perceived implementation of the ISLA intervention.

**Results**  
**Office Discipline Referrals**

During the 2014–15 school year, School 1 reported a total of 616 major ODRs (an average rate of 2.9 per day), and 34% ( $n = 206$ ) of 613 students received at least one ODR. During the 2015–16 school year in which the ISLA intervention was implemented, School 1 reported a total of 462 major ODRs (an average of

2.14 per day), and 25% ( $n = 206$ ) of students received at least one ODR.

During the 2014–15 school year, School 2 reported a total of 414 major ODRs (an average rate of 1.92 per day), and 27% of students received at least one ODR. During the 2015–16 school year, School 2 reported a total of 322 major ODRs (an average of 1.5 per day), and 20% of students received at least one ODR.

Thus, pre/post ISLA implementation, total major ODRs decreased by 25% for School 1 and decreased by 22% for School 2. In addition, there was a 9% decrease in the percentage of students who received at least one ODR in School 1 and a 7% decrease in School 2, which are associated with effect sizes of  $h = .18$  and  $h = .15$ , respectively (Figure 3).

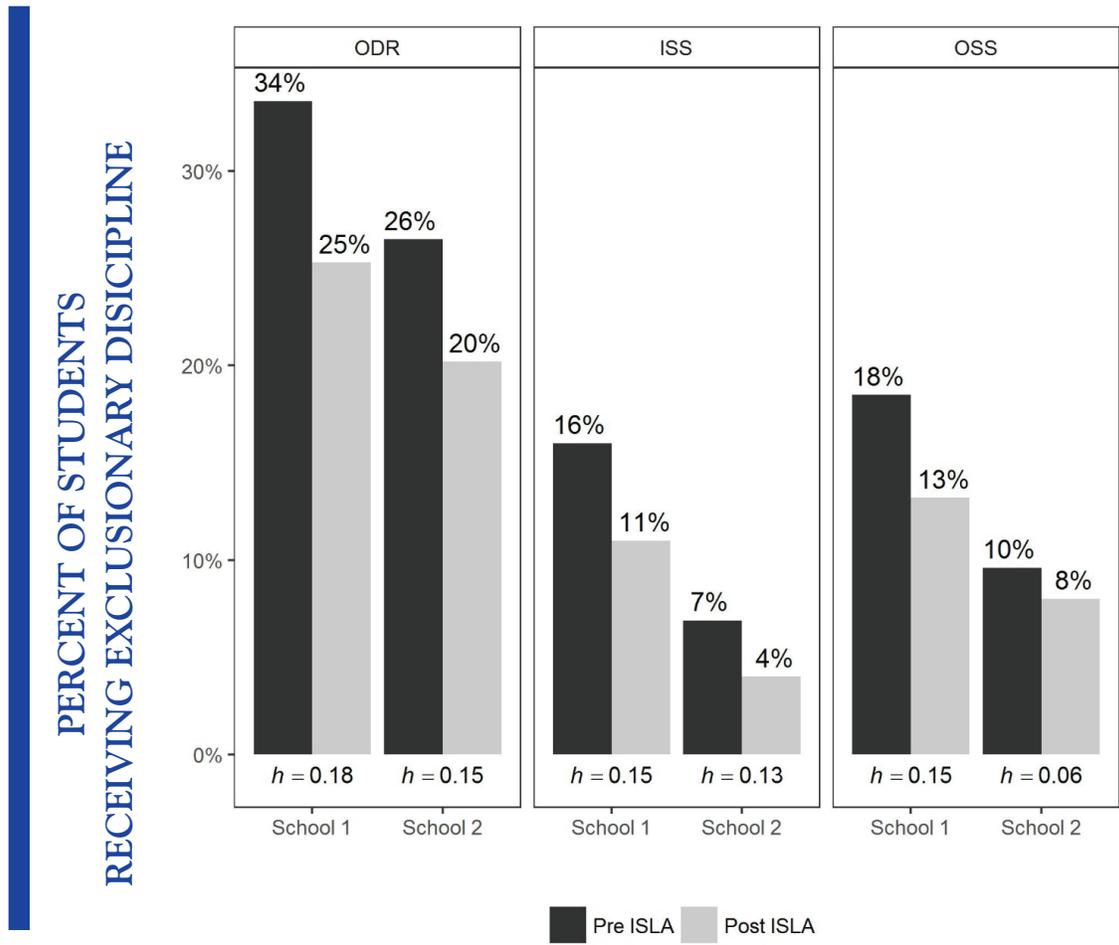


Figure 3. The percent of students in each of Schools 1 and 2 pre- and post-ISLA intervention who received out-of-school suspensions (OSS), in-school suspensions (ISS), and office discipline referrals (ODR). Below each pre-post ISLA paired bars in Cohen’s (1988)  $h$ , an effect size statistic for pre/post ISLA comparison or proportions of these outcomes (OSS, ISS, and ODR).

### Exclusionary Discipline Practices

Of the 613 students enrolled in School 1, 18.5% ( $n = 112$ ) received at least one OSS, 16% ( $n = 98$ ) received at least one ISS, and 1.1% ( $n = 7$ ) received expulsions in the 2014–15 school year (Figure 3). During the 2015–16 school year in which the ISLA intervention was implemented, of the 604 enrolled students in School 1, 13.2% ( $n = 80$ ) received at least one OSS, 11% ( $n = 65$ ) received at least one ISS, and 0.01% ( $n = 4$ ) received expulsions.

Of the 550 students enrolled in School 2 during the 2014-15 school year, 9.6% ( $n = 53$ ) received at least one OSS in the school year, 6.9% ( $n = 38$ ) received at least one ISS in the school year, and only one student (.002%) received an expulsion in 2014–2015 (Figure 3). During the 2015–16 school year in which the ISLA intervention was implemented, of the 530 enrolled students in School 2, 8% ( $n = 45$ ) received at least one OSS, 4% ( $n = 23$ ) received at least one ISS, and no student received an expulsion.

After the ISLA intervention, all outcomes showed a decrease in the percentage of students who received exclusionary discipline. The associated effect sizes for the decrease in ISS rates for School 1 was  $h = .15$  and

for School 2 was  $h = .13$  (Figure 3). The associated effect sizes for the decrease in OSS rates for Schools 1 and 2 was  $h = .15$  and  $h = .06$ , respectively (Figure 3). In School 1, three fewer students received expulsions from school (57% reduction) during ISLA implementation, an effect size of  $h = .14$ . In School 2, no expulsion statistics are reported because no student received an expulsion during ISLA implementation.

### Instructional Minutes Lost

Minutes of instructional time lost included any time lost due to out-of-class behavior referrals, regardless of whether the lost minutes resulted in disciplinary action. The sum of minutes of instructional time lost at School 1 prior to ISLA was 1,125 minutes. During the implementation of ISLA, the sum of instructional time lost was 75 minutes, a 93% reduction in minutes of lost instructional time compared to the previous year (Figure 4). This difference (1,050 minutes) amounted to more than two full days of school. The sum of instructional minutes lost at School 2 was 563 minutes prior to ISLA, and 45 minutes of lost instructional time following the ISLA intervention, a 92% reduction, and a difference (519 minutes) which represented more than a full day of school.

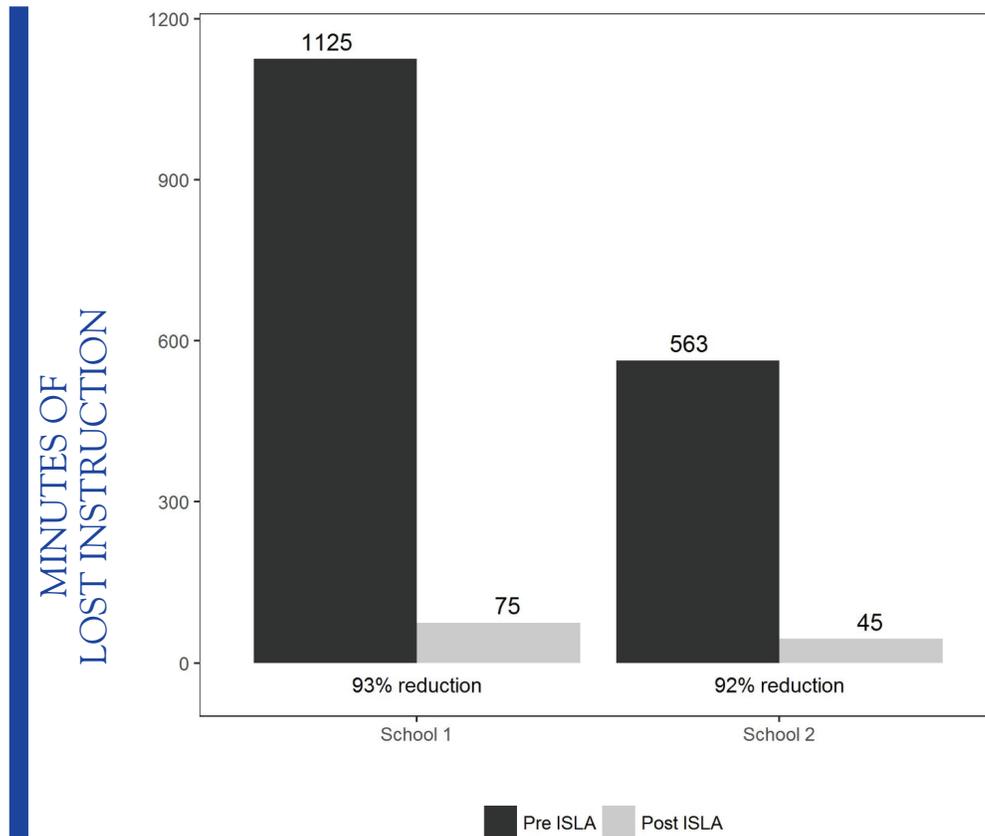


Figure 4. The number of minutes of lost instruction and the percent reduction in each of Schools 1 and 2 pre- and post-ISLA intervention.

### Staff Survey

A total of 10 staff members (teachers = 8, educational assistants = 2) completed the PIRS to measure the extent to which the ISLA intervention was perceived as being socially valid. The sample included respondents from both middle schools (40% from School 1 and 60% from School 2) with 30% of the responses identifying as male and 70% identifying as female. The average number

of years of teaching was 8.78 (range = 6 to 17 years). Overall, staff members rated the ISLA intervention favorably, with staff members indicating that ISLA was beneficial for their school, that they were willing to use ISLA, and that it was a feasible intervention to implement, among others. Mean scores for each item on the PIRS ranged from 4.89 to 5.70 and results are summarized in Table 1.

**Table 1.** Descriptive results of the social validity of the ISLA intervention.

<b>Item</b>	<b>N (% missing)</b>	<b>Mean (SD) Range</b>
1. This is an acceptable intervention for the middle school	10 (0)	5.60 (.52) 5-6
2. Most teachers find this intervention appropriate	10 (0)	5.40 (.52) 5-6
3. This intervention should prove effective in meeting the purposes	9 (10%)	5.44 (.53) 5-6
4. I would suggest the use of this intervention to other teachers	10 (0)	5.40 (.84) 4-6
5. The intervention is appropriate to meet the school's needs and mission	9 (10%)	5.44 (.73) 4-6
6. Most teachers find this intervention suitable for the described purposes and missions	9 (10%)	5.22 (.67) 4-6
7. I am willing to use this intervention in the school setting	10 (0)	5.70 (.48) 5-6
8. This intervention does not result in negative side effects for the students	10 (0)	5.20 (.92) 4-6
9. This intervention is appropriate for a variety of students	10 (0)	5.50 (.53) 5-6
10. This intervention is consistent with those I have used in school settings	10 (0)	5.30 (1.06) 3-6
11. The intervention is a fair way to fulfill the intervention purposes	9 (10%)	5.33 (.71) 4-6
12. This intervention plan is reasonable to meet the stated purposes	9 (10%)	5.44 (.73) 4-6
13. I like the procedures used in this intervention	10 (0)	5.10 (.99) 3-6
14. This intervention is a good way to meet the specified purpose	9 (10%)	5.44 (.73) 4-6
15. The monitoring procedures are manageable	9 (10%)	5.22 (.83) 4-6
16. The monitoring procedures give the necessary information to evaluate this plan	9 (10%)	4.89 (1.17) 3-6
17. Overall, this intervention is beneficial for middle school students	10 (0)	5.50 (.71) 4-6

### Staff Focus Group

Data were analyzed from a 1-hour focus group with school staff members. The interview was conducted by the lead author to gain additional contextual information on staff perceptions' of ISLA and implementation of the intervention in middle school settings. Italics below represent emphases added. First, staff were asked to describe the process of student discipline used in the school prior to ISLA implementation. Following that discussion, staff members were asked to describe what they enjoyed about ISLA implementation, what was challenging, and the impact ISLA had on their relationships with students. Overall, staff members liked the ISLA intervention, felt that it helped facilitate the process of getting students back to class with needed prosocial skills, and enjoyed the reconnections they made with students through the process. They also expressed the need for more information about what skills the student was working on through the ISLA process so that they could encourage those skills in the classroom. Below are sample quotes related to their experiences pre/post ISLA implementation.

#### Pre-ISLA Implementation

I very rarely have ever kicked kids out of class because there was no place for them to go, no support for them, and it wasn't going to be a like a positive sort of experience.  
– 6th-grade math teacher

#### Post-ISLA Implementation

##### ISLA Student Supports/Skill Building

It's a better healthier, relationship with the student... – 6th-grade math/science teacher

What I appreciate about it [ISLA] the most is the fact that the kids don't lose their total self-esteem. It helps them build it and they know they can start over and do it the right way and they don't give up and that's what I appreciate the most about it.– ISLA facilitator

They come back with an apology so we can tell that [the ISLA facilitator] has, you know, worked with them and given them some ideas and even given them some perspective [on their behavior]. – 6th-grade PE teacher

But, the fact that kids are not going to the office, but are instead side stepping that...the stigma that is connected to the 'you have been sent to the principal' automatically puts up a defense with so many kids... and you need to

work for sometimes hours to break that down for a kid to open up enough to say, 'yeah I did screw up, I should have done it this way.' – Principal

#### Staff Communication

As the classroom teacher, I think, um, having this as an intervention has been very good...I just think it would be helpful for the classroom teachers to know, ok, um, student x has been down there, has been sent for this many times for these behaviors and, you know, that way, in class, if or when, in class, I can maybe tap into what did you learn when you were with [ISLA facilitator], that kind of thing and try to stop it before it gets to that point again. – 6th-grade language arts teacher

#### ISLA Room

It's a positive room when you walk in. I mean the name alone is a good thing. But you go in there and people are being talked to and worked with and nobody is ashamed.  
– 6th-grade math/science teacher

#### Discussion

Both schools showed meaningful pre/post decreases in ODRs and the use of exclusionary discipline practices. Greater decreases were observed in School 1, where the percent of students receiving ODRs decreased by 9%, the percent of students receiving ISS and OSS decreased by about 5%, and expulsions decreased by 57%. The reduction in ODRs was associated with an effect size of .18, and each of ISS and OSS reductions were associated with an effect size of .15. In School 2, the percent of students receiving ODRs decreased by 7%, ISS decreased by 3%, OSS decreased by 1%, and expulsions were reduced from one to zero. Thus, both schools demonstrated decreases in the use of exclusion, although in different magnitudes; however, it is worth noting that the effect sizes associated with the reductions in proportions of ODRs and ISS were similar across schools, and the magnitude of those reductions represent meaningful and promising changes. These consistencies are particularly important, as the ISLA intervention specifically offers a n i nstruational alternative to in-school suspensions, creating a pathway toward increased school-wide restorative practices and decreased instructional minutes lost. The oft-cited rule-of-thumb offered by Cohen (1988) for interpreting the magnitude of effect sizes classifies  $h = .20$  as a small difference,  $h = .50$  as medium, and  $h = .80$  as large.

However, Cohen (p. 184) also advised to avoid the use of these conventions in favor of values provided by theory or experience in the specific area. In education, effect sizes of .50 are rarely observed, and research has reported average effect sizes of .10 (SD = 0.33) for whole-school treatments (Lipsey et al., 2012), indicating that the ODR and ISS effect sizes reported here demonstrate that ISLA has the potential to be an effective school-wide intervention.

In addition to the aforementioned similarity across schools observed for ISS effect sizes, both schools showed a pre/post ISLA reduction in ODRs of approximately 22% to 25% and a pre/post ISLA reduction in minutes of lost instruction of about 92%. Of course, causation cannot be inferred; however, some study limitations (e.g., cohort effect) might be mitigated by the observation of consistent and appreciable decreases in ISS, ODRs, and lost instructional time, all of which represent the potential for considerable benefit to schools.

### Limitations and Future Research

Several important limitations need to be considered when interpreting the findings and considering next steps for research. First, given this study was based on a limited sample of schools within one Northwestern state, results cannot be generalized to all schools. Both participating schools had limited racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic diversity and are not representative of other regions across the United States. Further research from other regions and schools serving more diverse populations of students is needed to confirm these findings and further elaborate on needed services.

A second limitation is that the design of the study was correlational, did not contain a control group, and participants were not randomized. Thus, causal inferences cannot be drawn. The use of quasi-experimental and randomized control group designs will strengthen the conclusions that can be made when examining the impact of instructional alternative to exclusionary discipline practices.

A third limitation is the absence of fidelity data collected on the ISLA coaching sessions provided to the school staff, building administrators, and the ISLA facilitators. Although these sessions were delivered by the first author, the absence of fidelity data on how the coaching sessions were conducted prevents us from ensuring that both schools received the same information and that all components were covered. Future studies on ISLA implementation will benefit from the measurement of coaching fidelity, as standardization across coaching supports provided to different schools is important for both documenting the success of the intervention as well as the generalizability of findings. Additionally, it should be noted that this study employed

a traditional method for training and coaching, whereby the first author provided these supports in person to both schools. Research examining different modalities for training (e.g., tele-coaching, train-the-trainer models) would add to the feasibility of implementing ISLA in different communities, including rural and remote settings, and districts where multiple schools are trained at a time.

Finally, student feedback on the ISLA intervention was not collected during the pilot study. Student voice and buy-in are critical for implementation success and the sustainability of practices over time, especially in middle and high school where students are more involved in shaping their school climate. Future research on the efficacy of this intervention would benefit from an iterative approach that takes multiple stakeholder viewpoints into consideration.

### Conclusion

Exclusionary discipline practices have long been used as responses to unwanted student behaviors. The findings from this pilot study suggest the ISLA intervention may be an effective tool for reducing out-of-school suspension, in-school suspensions, and expulsions. Initial impressions of the intervention's feasibility and usability were favorable. Given the exploratory nature of this study, future research and practice should focus on refining the intervention, employing quasi-experimental and experimental designs, and promoting generalization to schools.

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## Authors

[Rhonda N. T. Nese](#), PhD, is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Special Education and Clinical Sciences at the University of Oregon and a Principal Investigator within Educational and Community Supports, a research unit in the College of Education at the University of Oregon.

[Eoin Bastable](#), PhD, is a Postdoctoral researcher within the research unit Education and Community Supports at the University of Oregon.

[Cody Gion](#), PhD, is a Special Education Program Director with the Gresham-Barlow School District in Gresham, Oregon.

[Michelle Massar](#), PhD, is an Associate Principal at Jemtegaard Middle School with the Washougal School District in Washougal, Washington.

[Joseph F. T. Nese](#), PhD, is a Research Associate Professor at the University of Oregon and a Principal Investigator within Behavioral Research and Teaching, a research unit in the College of Education at the University of Oregon.

[Connor McCroskey](#), MEd. is the Director of Special Services with the Vancouver Public Schools in Vancouver, Washington.

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# The Predictive Nature of Mentoring Student Academic Progress, Mentor Educational Background, and Mentor Tenure Among High School Dropouts Who Graduated From an Educational Management Organization

Greg Hickman, Kingsley Chinaza Nwosu, Bradley Camper, and Jody Nelson

**Abstract:** Using official school data from a sample of 3,461 students enrolled in Grad Solutions, an Educational Management Organization (EMO), from 2015 through 2018, we conducted a quantitative cross-sectional research design study to understand the predictive nature by which students who dropped out of high school and re-enrolled in Grad Solutions graduated high school. The authors used logistic regression to examine the extent to which students' credits upon enrollment, students' credits remaining after enrollment, mentors' educational background, percentage of mentors' monthly student progress toward graduation, and tenure as a mentor on whether a student graduates or drops out from Grad Solutions. All variables of study significantly predicted  $p < .001$  and  $p < .01$ , an increase and decrease in the odds by which students graduated high school or dropped out of high school. Implications are drawn for designers of mentoring and intervention programs as well as EMOs.

Archambault, Janosz, Dupéré, Brault, and McAndrew (2017) theorized that the high school dropout phenomenon is linked to negative consequences, which may distress individuals and society. Wood, Kiperman, Esch, Leroux, and Truscott (2017) noted that this dropout phenomenon has led to increasingly high rates of unemployment, incarceration, and mortality. For example, Parr and Bonitz (2015) found that 45.7% of high school dropouts were employed, while high school graduates had an employment rate of 68.1%. The authors further noted that both employment rates fall extremely short of the 86.7% employment rate of college graduates.

Over the past few decades, stakeholders in education, business, and politics have established a plethora of initiatives, strategies, interventions, and policies aimed at addressing the persisting dropout phenomenon across the United States (Doll, Eslami, & Walters, 2013). For example, evidence-based programs and initiatives such as Blueprints for Healthy Youth Development, Office of Justice programs, National Registry of Evidence-Based Programs and Practices, and What Works Clearinghouse to name a few, have been developed to address the dropout phenomenon (Iachini, Rogelberg, Terry, & Lutz, 2016). Unfortunately, there is very little research on implementation and effectiveness of these interventions, practices, and policies (Freeman & Simonsen, 2015). Freeman and Simonsen (2015) found that of the 19 high school recovery programs identified by What Works Clearinghouse, only five recovery programs have research supporting positive results in improving graduation rates and lowering dropout rates.

High school dropout recovery programs are the result of initiatives and policies formed to address the dropout phenomenon, which eventually paved the way for the advent of charter schools (Lembreck & Peterson, 2013). The initial intent of the formation of charter schools was for teachers, parents, and community partners to develop a school that promotes innovation and addresses the needs of the local students (Roch & Sai, 2018). However, stakeholders noted difficulties in the business management of the schools and in educating students at the same time, which led charter schools to outsource the business managerial requirements with Educational Management Organizations (EMOs; Garcia, Barber, & Molnar, 2009).

According to Hickman and Anderson (2019), many of the policies and initiatives established in education have been crafted through collaborations between businesses and community stakeholders. The authors further noted that two of the best-known forms of collaboration are Charter Management Organizations (CMOs) and Educational Management Organizations (EMOs). Farrell, Wohlstetter, and Smith (2012) noted that CMOs are nonprofit organizations that manage a network of public charter schools that share several elements or goals toward educational success. Conversely, EMOs manage a school district or charter public school that receives public funds for a profit (Miron & Urschel, 2010). According to Eastman (2017), EMOs provide services that may include curriculum creation, hiring teachers, school management, and provision of necessary educational materials such as books, computers, and pencils. Moreover, one of the roles promoted by EMOs

has been employing mentors to support the students working toward high school completion (Hickman & Anderson, 2019).

Based on results of traditional brick and mortar schools, recovery schools, and charter schools toward improving graduation rates and lowering dropout rates of at-risk youth, EMOs emerged due to increasing pressure for districts to improve students' learning outcomes by fostering entrepreneurial and competitive spirits in the public schools (Bulkley & Hicks, 2005; Miron, 2008). Miron and Urschel (2009) found that EMO expertise tends to be the capacity to aid schools in attaining clarity of educational and managerial vision. Miron and Urschel (2009) further noted that EMOs tend to manage schools under contract and that the for-profit education management organizations are businesses that seek to make returns through their service delivery to schools and districts. Moreover, EMOs often bring innovations to those schools outsourced to them, while operating within the necessary guidelines and principles of those schools and districts (Miron & Urschel, 2009).

Though some EMOs that engage in whole school management exist, many are focused on specific supplemental services which include after school tutoring, teacher professional development, and special educational services (Bulkley & Burch, 2011). Bulkley and Burch also noted that EMOs are involved in professional training of teachers and managers, providing additional instructional services for at-risk students, and implementing face-to-face and online mentoring programs aimed at helping students graduate high school. Cupidore (2017) found that principals from public schools agreed that EMOs help improve the performance of students through innovative instructional and assessment packages they make available to public schools.

Despite recent emergence of EMOs into public education awareness, very little research has been conducted and published by EMOs. In a recent study, Hickman and Anderson (2019) examined the perceived impact of mentors among former high school dropouts who graduated high school. The authors surveyed high school graduates, who were once high school dropouts, from the EMO Grad Solutions located in Mesa, Arizona. These graduates identified what turned out to be five key characteristics exhibited by Grad Solutions mentors. These research participants identified that their mentors were helpful in their diploma-completion process by displaying skills in communication, encouragement, motivation, understanding, and caring. They further attributed having the opportunity to enroll in an EMO such as Grad Solutions as the difference they missed from their traditional schools from which they initially dropped out (Hickman & Anderson, 2019).

Although the aforementioned researchers illuminate important findings regarding EMOs and high school dropouts, we have found no research that has quantitatively examined the impact EMO mentors have on the pathway of former high school dropouts who later graduate from high school. More specifically, further research is warranted that could examine the predictive nature of mentors' educational background, mentors' monthly student progress, and mentors' tenure as well as students' credits upon enrollment and students' credits remaining after enrollment on high school graduation in an effort to address the documented problem of high school dropouts (Hickman & Heinrich, 2011).

The purpose of this quantitative, cross-sectional design study is to examine the predictive nature by which students' credits upon enrollment, students' credits remaining after enrollment, mentors' educational background, percentage of mentors' monthly student progress toward graduation, and tenure as a mentor on whether a student graduates or drops out from Grad Solutions. By conducting a logistic regression analysis of the aforementioned variables, we examined how the variables are related or unrelated toward predicting the odds of how students progress and eventually graduate from high school.

#### Research Questions

What is the predictive nature of students' credits earned upon enrollment, students' credits remaining after enrollment, mentors' educational background, percentage of mentors' monthly student progress toward graduation, and tenure as a mentor on whether a student graduates or drops out?

H0:  $\beta_1 = \beta_2 = \beta_3 = \beta_4 = \beta_5 = 0$

In the population, the odds of the independent variables students' credits earned upon enrollment, students' credits remaining after enrollment, mentors' educational background, percentage of mentors' monthly student progress toward graduation, and mentors' tenure increasing the likelihood of the dependent variable graduating or dropping out of high school equals zero.

H1:  $\beta_1 \neq \beta_2 \neq \beta_3 \neq \beta_4 \neq \beta_5 \neq 0$

In the population, the odds of the independent variables of students' credits earned upon enrollment, students' credits remaining after enrollment, mentors' educational background, percentage of mentors' monthly student progress toward graduation, and mentors' tenure increasing the likelihood of the dependent variable graduating or dropping out of high school equals zero.

#### Method

Given that the purpose of this study was to analyze

the significance of the relationship between the variables of study that predicted whether former high school dropouts either graduated or dropped out of the EMO Grad Solutions, it was appropriate to use a quantitative cross-sectional design. For this study, secondary data from Grad Solutions was analyzed. The variables of study were pulled from the main data source and exported to IBM SPSS®, a software platform for advanced statistical analyses. No identifying markers for student and mentor names were provided in the data set. The variables chosen for this study were based not only on a lack of research to address high school dropouts, but also based on variables deemed important for understanding the predictive nature by which students who once dropped out of school eventually graduated from school.

Rather than sample those students who graduated or dropped out of Grad Solutions, we examined the entire population of students who graduated or dropped out from Grad Solutions from July 2015 through July 2018 for our study and analysis. This yielded a sample of 3,461 students, which exceeded the recommended sample size of 92 using regression analysis, medium effect of .15, power of .80, and 5 predictor variables using G\*Power sample size calculation.

#### Independent Variable

**Credits Needed Upon Enrollment.** Credits upon enrollment was defined as how many credits the student needs to graduate high school. Official school data were obtained from the high school the student transferred from upon enrolling at Grad Solutions. Example credits would be 3, 4, 4.5, etc. credits to complete in order to graduate.

**Credits Remaining.** Credits remaining was based on the formula of Credits Upon Enrollment minus Credits Earned in the program. For example, if a student comes to the program needing five credits to graduate and they earned two credits during their tenure at Grad Solutions, the value for credits remaining would be three ( $5 - 2 = 3$ ). Values for credits remaining were derived from official school data.

**Mentor Educational Background.** Mentors were coded as 0 = noneducational background and 1 = educational background. To be considered having an educational background, they had to have graduated with a college degree in education and worked previously in an educational school setting. Not all mentors employed by Grad Solutions have educational backgrounds, hence the dichotomous coding.

**Mentor Student Progress.** Mentor student progress was defined as the percentage each student progresses on a monthly basis toward completing their courses. For example, if a student has completed 50% of the course

over a given month, the mentor is said to have helped the student make 50% progress. Progress made by students is charged to mentors in terms of holding mentors accountable to student progress and is recorded each month. The higher the percentage of students making monthly progress, the higher the impact the mentor is attributed to have in helping students graduate.

**Mentor Tenure.** Mentor tenure was defined as the length of time in days the mentor has been with Grad Solutions. Mentors' start and exit dates were calculated in SPSS to create time in program based on days.

#### Dependent Variable

**Completion Status.** Completion status was defined as a student either having graduated or dropped out regardless of reason, from Grad Solutions. The categories were dummy coded as Dropped out = 0 and Graduated = 1.

This study used binary logistic regression to predict the likelihood of whether at-risk male and female students enrolled at Grad Solutions graduated or dropped out of school. Logistic regression allowed the researchers to examine which independent variables were likely to increase or decrease the probability of graduating high school. An analysis of -2LL chi-square was used to examine the goodness-of-fit model of the independent variables (i.e., students' credits earned upon enrollment, students' credits remaining after enrollment, mentors' educational background, percentage of mentors' monthly student progress toward graduation, and mentor tenure) and the dependent variable (i.e., graduated or dropped out of high school).

#### Results

The research question for this study examined to what extent the variables students' credits earned upon enrollment, students' credits remaining after enrollment, mentors' educational background, percentage of mentors' monthly student progress toward graduation, and mentors' tenure predicted whether at-risk male and female adolescents will graduate or drop out of high school.

The sample consisted of 3,641 high school students enrolled in Grad Solutions, an Educational Management Organization, to complete their high school degree from July 2015–July 2018 who had once dropped out of high school. The average age of students was 21.98 years and 23.4% reported that they were Minorities, while 42% reported they were male and 58% reported they were female. Other student characteristics included 15.1% ELL status, 11.9% enrolled in special education classes, 11.2% with IEPs, and 4.6% homeless. See Table 1 for complete summary.

Table 1.

*Demographic Characteristics of Participants from July 2015–July 2018*

Variable	n	Percent
Total enrolled students	3,641	
Average Age	21.98	
Gender		
Male		42%
Female		58%
Minority		23.4%
ELL status		15.1%
Enrolled in special education		11.9%
IEPs		11.2%
Homeless		4.6%
Program Results		
Received diploma		13.3%
Did not receive diploma		86.7%

The students in the sample were mentored by 24 mentors employed by Grad Solutions. Mentors' caseloads of students averaged approximately 144 students. The average tenure of the mentors was 33.64 months and 58.1% were female, compared to 41.9% male. Of the

24 mentors, 30.5% had an educational background compared to 69.5% of mentors not having an educational background prior to being hired by Grad Solutions. See Table 2 for complete summary.

Table 2.

*Demographic Characteristics of Mentors*

Variable	n	Percent
Total Number of Mentors	24	
Average Approximate Caseload	144	
Average Tenure of Mentors in Months	33.64	
Gender		
Male		41.9
Female		58.1
Mentors With Educational Background		30.5
Mentors Without Educational Background		69.5

In addition, the means and standard deviations of the independent variables (i.e., students' credits earned upon enrollment, students' credits remaining after enrollment, mentors' educational background, percentage of mentors' monthly student progress toward graduation, and

mentors' tenure), and dependent variable (i.e., graduating or dropping out of high school) are presented in Table 3. Moreover, a correlation matrix of the predictor variables is presented in Table 4.

**Table 3**

*Means and Standard Deviations of Variables*

Variable	Mean	SD
Mentor Tenure at GS	33.64	16.88
Student Percentage Progress	.71	.31
Mentor Educational Background	.30	.46
Credits Remaining Upon Enrollment	11.54	6.09
Average Credits Earned Per Year	2.71	1.66

**Table 4**

*Correlation Matrix of Variables*

	Mentor Tenure at GS	Student Percentage x Mentor	Mentor Educational Background	Credits Remaining Upon Enrollment	Average Credits Earned Per Year
Mentor Tenure at GS	1.000				
Student Percentage x Mentor	.167	1.000			
Mentor Educational Background	.243	.025	1.000		
Credits Remaining Upon Enrollment	.050	-.022	-.057	1.000	
Average Credits Earned Per Year	-.022	-.072	-.077	.520	1.000

The aforementioned variables accounted for the logistic regression equation and were entered simultaneously as predictors of completing the program and graduating from high school. All variables in the model significantly predicted high school graduation. More specifically, holding all other independent variables constant, for a one-unit increase (SD = 16.88) in mentor's tenure at Grad Solutions, the odds of graduating high school were increased by approximately 4%. In addition, holding all other independent variables constant, for a one-unit increase (SD = .30) in mentors having an educational background, the odds of graduating high

school were increased by approximately 86%. Also, holding all other independent variables constant, for a one-unit increase (SD = 31.29) in percentage of mentor's monthly student progress toward graduation, the odds of graduating high school were increased by approximately 4,711%. Also, of note, holding all other independent variables constant, for a one-unit increase (SD = 6.1) in credits needed upon enrollment to graduate, the odds of graduating high school were decreased by approximately 183%. Finally, holding all other independent variables constant, for a one-unit increase (SD = 1.6) in credits earned once enrolled, the odds of graduating high school

were increased by approximately 16%. Overall, the model chi-square was found to be significant ( $X^2 = 672.55$   $df = 5$ ,  $p < .001$ ). Moreover, Nagelkerke's pseudo  $R^2$

indicated a high goodness-of-fit as the model accounted for approximately 34% of the variance. See Table 5 for summary of the logistic regression equation variables.

Table 5

*Variables in the Equation*

Variables		B	S.E.	Wald	Df	Sig.	Exp(B)	95% C.I. for EXP(B)	
								Lower	Upper
Step 1 <sup>a</sup>	Mentor Tenure at GS	.035	.004	65.029	1	.000 *	1.035	1.027	1.044
	Student Percentage x Mentor	3.874	.312	154.344	1	.000 *	48.111	26.113	88.643
	Does Mentor Have Educational Background?	.623	.129	23.209	1	.000 *	1.864	1.447	2.402
	Average Credits Earned Per Year	.150	.049	9.268	1	.002**	1.162	1.055	1.280
	Credits Remaining Upon Enrollment	-.186	.016	134.130	1	.000 *	.830	.805	.857
	Constant	-5.079	.420	146.105	1	.000 *	.006		

\* $p < .001$

\*\* $p < .01$

Discussion

This quantitative logistic regression study attempted to provide an empirical model that investigated the predictive nature of students' credits earned upon enrollment, students' credits remaining after enrollment, mentors' educational background, percentage of mentors' monthly student progress toward graduation, and tenure as a mentor on whether a student graduates or drops out in a mentoring program at the Grad Solutions EMO.

The results are pertinent in this study, as we found all the independent variables were significant predictors of whether a student graduates or drops out of high school. Moreover, the findings of our study underscore the importance of considering such factors in mentoring at-risk adolescents toward graduating high school.

A mentor's tenure employed at Grad Solutions significantly increased the odds of graduating high school. That is, for every increase in tenure employed,

the odds of graduating increased 4%. Such a finding supports research that mentees look for and benefit from experienced mentors because of the vast wealth of their experiences and networks of connections (Straus, Johnson, Marquez, & Feldman, 2013). The wealth of experience of a mentor appears to be facilitating productive relationships and provisions of solutions to a mentee's challenges. Indeed, researchers have noted that the longer one is employed at the same position, the more likely that employee can garner relevant experiences that will enable one to be efficient (Roch & Sai, 2018). Thus, it appears that longer tenured mentors can benefit programs by way of their experience in guiding and directing the educational pathway of success for their mentees. Conversely, inexperienced mentors may not understand the logistics and nuances involved in mentoring (Ambrosetti, 2012). This finding supports researchers who found that at-risk students who had more experienced teachers and mentors are more likely to succeed than those who encountered inexperienced teachers and mentors (Silver, Saunders, & Zarate, 2008).

Mentor's educational background significantly increased the odds of graduating high school. That is, the odds of graduating increased 86% when students were paired with mentors with an educational background. This is an important finding, as students who were not paired with mentors with an educational background were less likely to graduate. Such findings support research that when mentors have specialized expertise and experience as it pertains to a given program, the effectiveness of the mentors increases, as do programmatic outcomes (St-Jean & Audet, 2009). Given that mentors with educational backgrounds are rooted in the educational management mission of Grad Solutions, it seems inherent students benefited from mentors with an educational background as such mentors are more likely to offer useful educational information and experiences that help these at-risk adolescents to navigate the educational system and graduate.

Credits students needed upon enrollment to Grad Solutions significantly decreased the odds of graduating high school. That is, for every increase in credits needed to graduate high school upon enrollment to Grad Solutions, the odds of graduating decreased 183%. Researchers have found that dropouts who attend dropout recovery schools and charter schools tend to need more credits to graduate and be more at risk for dropout (Wood et al., 2017). Our findings support research by Silver, Saunders, and Zarate (2008) in that high school students who exhibited successive failures in academic settings had significantly reduced graduation rates. Thus, based on our research and past research, it is likely that when high school dropouts enroll in dropout recovery schools, charter schools, and EMOs burdened

with numerous credits to graduate, they tend to give up their academic pursuits and drop out of school once again.

Such a finding is important for high school dropout recovery schools, charter schools, and EMOs to understand who benefits from their programs. In conducting post-hoc analyses, we found that students who enrolled in Grad Solutions needing 4–5 credits to graduate benefitted the most. That is, students needing 4–5 credits had a graduation rate of 38%. Given that the overall graduation rate of Grad Solutions during the time frame of this study was approximately 13%, it appears targeting students in this range is most beneficial for student learning outcomes and success, as well as institutional effectiveness.

Credits earned by students while enrolled in Grad Solutions significantly increased the odds of graduating high school. That is, for every increase in credits a student needs upon enrolling to Grad Solutions, the odds of graduating increased 16%. In other words, the more progress students make (the more credits they earn), the longer they are in Graduate Solutions, and thus, more likely to graduate. This is in line with researchers who have shown that lack of credits earned is a performance characteristic associated with students not graduating college (e.g., Burrus & Roberts, 2012), and that graduation probabilities are positive factors linked to earning more credits among students (Calcagno, Crosta, Bailey, & Jenkins, 2006). Calcagno et al. (2006) further noted that students who completed increasing amounts of their program are likely to complete their educational program. Adelman's (1999) study, which analyzed national data among students seeking to complete their degrees, demonstrated that credits earned predicted whether a student completes a degree or not and that those who earned lower amounts of credits had fewer chances of completing their degrees. In other words, students who earn more credits when enrolled in a program are likely to see the possibility of progressing, which may provide encouragement to complete the program.

Mentor's monthly student progress toward graduation at Grad Solutions significantly increased the odds of graduating high school. That is, for every increase in monthly student progress toward graduation, the odds of graduating increased 4,711%. Indeed, a mentor's monthly student progress was the most robust predictor toward students graduating in the model. The more progress mentors helped students make each month, the greater the chances of former dropouts completing credits for courses and beating the odds and graduating high school. Such a finding suggests the need for recruiting, training, and accountability of mentors in mentoring programs targeted toward high school dropouts.

## Limitations

When interpreting the findings, there are several limitations that should be considered. First, our sample size ( $n = 3,461$ ) was very large. Because our sample was so large, the test value or  $r$  values from the logistic regression analysis are smaller than what would be found in a smaller sample size. That is, as a sample size increases, variation decreases. Moreover, replicating a study with such a large sample size may be challenging. Second, we examined former dropout students in general. What would be helpful in future research is to unpack this model by gender and ethnicity. Perhaps differences exist in the model based on such demographic variables. Finally, this study was delimited to one Education Management Organization in the Southwest region of the United States. Future researchers may want to collaborate with other EMOs, charter schools, and dropout recovery schools from other regions of the United States. Such research efforts could address replication and the possibility of new outcomes in reducing the high school dropout rate based on regional differences.

## Conclusion

Despite such limitations, our study has merit. We learned in our study that it is important to recruit mentors with an educational background. Those mentors with educational backgrounds have more success with their students in terms of students making progress and graduating high school. Indeed, those students with mentors with an educational background have a clear advantage, as such mentors are former teachers, principals, and counselors and have experiences in and knowledge of the education system and what it takes to help students succeed in an educational environment, compared to mentors that do not have an educational background.

It is also important to train mentors working with the population of students who have dropped out of high school. For example, Hickman and Anderson (2019) found that students who had dropped out of high school and who later graduated from Grad Solutions attributed their success to mentors who excelled in communication, encouragement, motivation, understanding, and caring. Those schools, agencies, programs, etc., working with students who drop out of high school may want to consider providing training geared toward the five themes found in Hickman and Anderson's (2019) study.

Not only are recruiting the right mentors and training mentors important for success in working with high school dropouts, avoiding turnover is important. Indeed, we found that the longer the tenure of mentors, the more positive results were gained in terms of credits earned and graduating high school. Researchers have found that turnover among teachers, counselors, and mentors has

a negative impact on educational outcomes of students, especially students who are at risk of dropping out and those who have dropped out (Hsieh & Nguyen, 2019).

Working with the population of high school dropouts is challenging. However, research efforts by Education Management Organizations (EMOs), such as Grad Solutions, are paving the way for the next generation of what we know about high school dropouts and how to manage their educational needs effectively to increase their chances of graduating high school. Perhaps researchers can track such former high school dropouts who graduated from EMOs into postsecondary education and beyond. Such an effort may increase our understanding of high school dropouts and the effectiveness of EMOs.

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## Authors

[Greg Hickman](#), PhD, has been with Walden University since 2010 and is currently a Senior Core Faculty member in Human Services. He is a nationally known scholar of educational, psychological, community, and familial research, as he has spent over two decades researching at-risk issues related to child and adolescent development and developing community partnerships aimed at creating social change. Dr. Hickman is Research Fellow for the National Dropout Prevention Center and editor for *The Journal of At-Risk Issues*.

[Kingsley Chinaza Nwosu](#), PhD, is a lecturer in the Department of Educational Foundations, Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka, Nigeria. His special area is educational psychology. Dr. Nwosu's research interests include intervention programs for special needs children, self-belief systems of students, metacognition, teacher education, and technology and learning.

[Bradley Camper](#), PhD, has been an adjunct professor with Middlesex County College in New Jersey since 2017. He has over 15 years of experience working with at-risk populations, which range from substance abuse to dropouts. Dr. Camper has spent the last 10 years researching the dropout phenomenon and substance abuse as they pertain to at-risk populations. Currently, Dr. Camper is a Court Services Officer with the New Jersey Judiciary and a reviewer for *The Journal of At-Risk Issues*.

[Jody Nelson](#) is a first-generation college student enrolled at Walden University as an undergraduate in the Human Services program. Ms. Nelson is an active community volunteer and is working to establish a cultural exchange program where local English and Spanish speakers have the chance to share language, culture, and experiences in a safe and fun environment.

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# Local Case Management Team Holistic Intervention for At-Risk Ninth Graders: A Case Study

Jessica Grant, Russell Yokum, and Glenn Holzman

**Abstract:** Based on existing empirical research, schools continue to use single intervention programs for intervening on behalf of at-risk students despite the fact that those programs do not meet with significant success in decreasing dropout rates. The problem is that the phenomenon of multidimensional approaches to intervening on behalf of ninth-grade students has yet to be fully explored and understood. The purpose of this single case study was to describe the case of Local Case Management Teams utilizing a multidimensional approach to intervening on behalf of at-risk ninth grade students in a large suburban school district in Utah. The following research question guided this study: How do local case management teams describe their experiences in ninth-grade intervention/dropout prevention? The theory that guided this study was Communities of Practice by Lave and Wenger (1991) as it explains the relationship between Communities of Practice and Local Case Management Teams. A single case study design was utilized to provide an in-depth analysis of this critical case, bounded by time and activity, and using a variety of data collection procedures and analysis strategies over a sustained period. Participants were chosen using purposeful sampling. Data included interviews, observation, and document analysis and were analyzed using traditional case study analysis methods including memoing, pattern matching, within-case synthesis, and resulted in the development of several themes. Time, accountability, knowledge, escalating intrinsic and extrinsic barriers to success, and multidimensional programming were identified as central themes to this research. Although the participants reported differing experiences, their responses to this type of programming was overwhelmingly positive.

The school and the classroom play an important role in the life of students at risk for dropping out as they provide pathways for achievement, self-esteem, and self-worth (Kiefer, Alley, & Ellerbrock, 2015). Unfortunately, instead of being proactive, too many schools react after students have already failed and disengaged from school (Goss, 2017). Freeman et al. (2015) suggested that, since dropping out is generally the result of a long process of disengagement, a comprehensive approach that focuses on prevention, tiered intervention, improving school climate because the, and diminishing risk factors seems acutely relevant in addressing the dropout problem. However, new programs are less likely to be adopted by teachers when they are presented as a mandate requiring strict, precise implementation (Edwards et al., 2014; Vennebo & Ottesen, 2015). Conversely, according to Holdsworth and Maynes (2017), “Innovations that are developed or adapted to a specific school context are much more likely to result in long-term and sustainable positive change” (pp. 688–689). Since there is no fast and easy solution to end dropout, and effectual prevention measures must be prudently viewed within a context that provides a foundation for continuing implementation and sustainability of evidence-based practices.

One such evidence-based practice includes the establishment of communities of practice within the school. Lave and Wenger’s (1991) theory of communities of practice reasons that learning does not reside with the individual, but it is a social practice of meaning

making. While a team is defined by a joint task-driven undertaking that team members have to accomplish together, “A community of practice is a learning partnership related to a domain of practice. Members of the community of practice may engage in the same practice while working on different tasks” (Farnsworth et al., 2016, p. 143). According to Wenger (2016), teachers, who are considered specialists in their field, do not just implement research or policies connection between research and implementation is complicated. Because peoples’ identities, along with the practice of teaching, are localized endeavors, and if identity is “viewed from a community of practice perspective, to be an organizing principle in the design of education, we will not create a curriculum of objective knowledge but focus our energies on designing learning contexts that promote identity negotiation” (Wenger, 2016, pp. 149–157). Furthermore, communities of practice can be used to establish an environment for pushing faculty who are resistant to new approaches to begin adopting those practices because they help to fuel an intrinsic motivation in teachers because they are motivated by respected colleagues (Tomkin et al., 2019).

For students, the transition from middle or junior high to high school requires particular attention, since it occurs during puberty and its concomitant psychophysical changes (Longobardi et al., 2016). Students often enter ninth grade unaware that it is a critical year that will likely determine whether they will meet with success during high school (Tobin & Colley, 2018). In fact,

researchers have demonstrated a correlation between insufficient credit accrual in the freshman year and the likelihood that a student will not graduate (Heppen et al., 2016). This pattern can be correlated to the fact that monitoring and support, which occurred in eighth grade, declines in the ninth grade and good academic habits thus become a choice for students (Allensworth, 2013).

Ultimately, researchers around the world have determined that to better the school community, improving the classroom experience for students is critical (Holdsworth & Maynes (2017). A community of care may not be optional for students at-risk for dropping out to be successful; it may be a prerequisite (Densmore-James, & Yocum, 2015; Ellerbrock et al., 2017). While it takes more time and labor to develop interventions based on individual students' needs, an individual approach that tends to students' social-emotional learning might be more likely to be successful in mitigating dropout (Dougherty & Sharkey, 2017). Qualified case managers, special educators, paraprofessionals, social workers, and counselors are also necessary for struggling students to get the most out of educational settings (Morgan et al., 2013).

According to a recent practice guide commissioned by the Institute of Education Sciences (IES), many ninth-grade transition and intervention programs are not structured to ensure that students receive additional support and personalized care (IES, 2017). The transition program must be comprehensive and rooted within the curriculum and school culture, be ongoing, and must create an environment that concentrates on the special transitional issues of the at-risk ninth grade student (Freeman & Simonsen, 2013). Dougherty and Sharkey (2017) recommend that, instead of schools seeking a one-size-fits-all approach to dropout prevention, they should focus their attention on interventions that address each student's individual risk factors. Freeman and Simonsen (2013), along with many other researchers, bring attention to this need by calling on future research to include more studies that investigate and address multidimensional approaches to dropout intervention (IES, 2017).

Although the research regarding dropout prevention illuminates important findings, little to no significant research was found that has examined the phenomenon of multidimensional approaches to intervening on behalf of students at risk for dropping out and the IES (2017) noted an absence of supporting literature or research regarding effective single intervention approaches. Given such, further research is warranted that could examine this multidimensional approach address the documented problem that single intervention programs have not met with significant success in decreasing dropout rates. The purpose of this single case study was to describe Local Case Management Teams (LCMT) utilizing a multidimensional approach to assist at-risk ninth grade

students in a large suburban school district, Mooseland County Public Schools (MCPS) (pseudonym), in Utah. Therefore, the following research question guided the study: How do local case management teams describe their experiences utilizing a multidimensional approach to intervening on behalf of at-risk ninth grade students in a large suburban school district in Utah?

## Methods

To describe the case of a Local Case Management Team (LCMT) utilizing a multidimensional approach to intervene on behalf of at-risk ninth grade students, a single (bounded), embedded case study was utilized to allow the participants to best describe their experiences with this approach. According to the most recent demographics available, the high school graduation rate for MCPS in Utah was 95.5% in 2016 compared to 85% in the state of Utah and 84% across the United States (NCES, 2018). Minority enrollment is 16% (the majority of whom are Hispanic) compared with 15.6% across the United States (MCPS, NCES, 2018). Of the student population, 22.1% are eligible to receive free and reduced lunch prices (MCPS, 2018).

Junior high schools (grades seven through nine) in MCPS, which were implementing the LCMT with a high level of fidelity, were invited to participate in the study. Once the LCMT was selected, the lead researcher contacted each individual participant from the LCMT, which included administrators, counselors, special educators, a school psychologist, and general educators, to collect the consent forms and schedule the interviews. Once participants were secured, data collection began with acquisition and analysis of documentary information, participant interviews, and observations. To guide the analysis, the lead researcher relied on theoretical propositions suggested by the theory of communities of practice because they pointed to significant contextual conditions that were described and explanations that were examined (Yin, 2018).

## Interviews

Once the concept of the LCMT was explored and understood by the researchers, individual, open-ended interviews of the individual participants began (Appendix A). Yin (2018) suggested that interviews are particularly helpful in suggesting the how and why of significant events as well as insight into the participants' relative perspectives. For the purposes of this study, the researchers determined that in-depth interviews were the most suitable structure (Yin, 2018). There were 11 open-ended interviews, one per participant, lasting approximately a half hour to 50 minutes. No additional follow-up interviews were conducted because participants were given the opportunity to check for accuracy.

Thoughtful and purposeful member checking was used to ensure the transcriptions were accurate and consistent with the participants' experience within an LCMT (Moustakas, 1994). This occurred after the transcriptions and data analysis were complete.

### Observations

Once the interviews of the individual participants were completed, LCMT meeting(s) were observed that included those staff members who were previously interviewed using an observation protocol designed based on the defining features of a community of practice. Observations were conducted during the weekly LCMT meeting, which generally lasts for one hour. Observations continued until theoretical saturation of the themes that emerged from the participant interviews was achieved (Eisenhardt, 1989). According to Yazan (2015), "Observational data can be integrated as auxiliary or confirmatory research" (p. 87). Yin (2018) expressed that case study research assumes the phenomenon of interest will have some relevant social or environmental conditions that may be observed either formally or informally and may suggest things about the culture or participants' status in relation to the phenomenon. The purpose of observation in this case study was to corroborate findings that may already have been established from both the document analysis and LCMT participant interviews. Observations of the LCMTs were useful in adding a dimension of understanding in order that strategies relating to the successful implementation of LCMT at other sites can be confirmed by robust evidence (Fuller et al., 2003; Yin, 2018).

### Document Analysis

Document analysis was the final of three complimentary sources of evidence. Documents, which are considered a relevant case study tool in the data collection process, allowed the lead researcher to utilize triangulation of data in the collection methods to enhance trustworthiness as well as to increase understanding of the impact on the participants (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Yin, 2018). Document analysis of items, such as the LCMTs' agendas, minutes of meetings, and other internal records were completed. Specifically, these documents included information related to plans for intervention and designated who on the LCMT was directly responsible for the intervention. This was an important step in the data collection process, as the researcher needs to be able to corroborate information from other sources through the specific details the documents can provide. Document analysis occurred throughout the study with the explicit understanding that documents are written with a specific purpose and for a specific audience, sometimes exclusive of those who are participants in the case study (Yin, 2018).

### Sampling Strategy

The participants were chosen using purposeful sampling based on the criterion that the participants were active members of the LCMT being studied (Yin, 2018). Maximum variation was achieved by participation of building administrators, guidance counselors, school psychologist, special educators, and teacher(s) from the LCMT as embedded sub-units (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Yin, 2018). Since the school principal ultimately determines the composition of the school's LCMT, there is some variation between schools in overall team composition. The choice of LCMT participants was bounded by those who have worked a minimum of one school semester on an LCMT and participated on the same LCMT during that time period. Therefore, the sample size included 11 embedded participants, not atypical to a single-embedded case study design (Yin, 2018). Pseudonyms were utilized to protect the identities of the district, the school, the LCMTs, and its participants.

The first embedded case on this particular LCMT was that of the school administration, including the school principal. Although school principals are generally responsible for providing strategic direction for the school, the principals' role within the LCMT is more closely related to their expertise in monitoring student achievement and behavior. The two assistant principals who served on the LCMT were included as part of this embedded case as well. Although these assistant principals are assigned managerial and organizational tasks, they also share duties and responsibilities with the principal. Their roles within the LCMT are more closely related to their areas of expertise and assigned organizational task, e.g., special education, behavioral intervention, etc.

The next embedded case included the junior high's three guidance counselors who served on the LCMT. Each of these counselors maintain a caseload equivalent to roughly one third of the school's population, helping those students in the areas of academic achievement, career, and social/emotional development. Their roles within the LCMT are closely aligned with their day-to-day roles. These counselors are considered experts on the portion of the population they serve, and therefore their expertise is in the holistic view they hold of the students.

The special educators who served on the LCMT were also included as embedded cases. The special education teachers serve as educators and as advocates for students with special needs, managing their individualized education programs (IEPs). Their role within the LCMT is to utilize their expertise in special education to help identify students who have a disability that is impeding their success in school.

The next embedded case was that of the school psychologist. The school psychologist provides expertise

in mental health to help individual students succeed academically, socially, behaviorally, and emotionally. The psychologist's role within the LCMT includes utilizing his/her knowledge and experience to be involved integrally in the screening process, teacher and team consultation to support intervention development, intervention implementation, and monitoring student progress.

The last embedded case was that of three of the school's teachers. The teachers attend to the social, personal and academic needs of students who have been identified as at-risk for failing. The teachers' role on the LCMT is to provide comprehensive documentation of student progress and to develop supplementary education that addresses the specific needs of at-risk students. Furthermore, these teachers use their expertise to facilitate interactions between students and their other teachers while monitoring and supporting the academic progress of those students, further enabling them to make recommendations for further services.

## Results

On this day Elan Junior High's LCMT began with a student who had been on their agenda for over six months, Samuel. Samuel ended up on the LCMT's caseload after he was identified by the school's EWS as a truant who was failing all of his classes. In gathering evidence from teachers to inform the intervention process, the LCMT was also notified that Samuel was living out of a car with his parents. Melody, who represents the English department, asked, "Where are we with Sam? What is his history of interventions?"

Veronica brought up his intervention screen. Initially, the LCMT collected data from the teachers on the tier I interventions they had attempted in their classrooms. Subsequently, the team recommended testing for special education, though it took quite a bit of time to complete the testing because of Samuel's truancy, and he ultimately did not qualify for services. Although the school's administration had been working to develop a better relationship between Samuel and school, Samuel was assigned the choir teacher, who is also a member of the LCMT, as a mentor. The LCMT also contacted Child and Family Services, which subsequently removed Samuel from his parent's custody and placed him with a foster family.

Melody asked, "Have his grades improved since being removed from his parent's custody?" Veronica quickly changed the screen to show Samuel's current grades. "That's impressive," Melody added.

Roger chimed in, "More importantly, we were able to get him counseling, he has a roof over his head, food in his belly, and his foster family makes him come to school." Samuel was ultimately removed from the LCMT's caseload.

Although the team encountered several cases on the agenda after Samuel's that they were unable to close out, primarily due to attendance issues, the team was able to conclude its meeting on a high note. Louis, brought up the last name on the agenda for the day, Andy. Harris, the math representative, said happily, "He's doing a lot better in my class. . ." All of the members expressed their joy at this news. Harris continued, "He's very motivated by track."

Veronica jumped in, "He's failing now with just one 'F.' Do we want to explain it to him, or do we want him to see it on the report card?" She clarified for the group that she was referring to the track coach.

Anthony responded, "We can explain it to the coach so he can continue to run and then add a higher standard for future terms."

For schools in MCPS, one goal is to get to a point where the staff is always proactively looking for students to provide help before a challenge becomes a crisis that prevents the students from moving forward. Over the course of the last five years, Elan Junior High has reduced its number of one-time referrals by 50%, which Roger attributes to the work of the LCMT. Furthermore, teachers in the school take care of about 90% of all discipline issues because the principal feels that teachers are now much more consistent about applying those interventions. The LCMTs represent all of the critical aspects of education, with the goal of having rich conversations that get to the heart of what is happening with students at risk for dropping out.

The LCMTs operate on the premise that in order for any evidence-based practice to have its desired effect on students, it must be implemented effectively, and it also must be sustainable. The district's website references Fixsen et al.'s (2009) *Scaling Up Brief* utilized in the development of LCMTs: "Students cannot benefit from [interventions] they do not experience" (Fixsen, Blase, Horner & Sugai, 2009, p. 1). The educational science behind MCPS' LCMTs relies heavily on research from the National Implementation Research Network, and specifically on the key drivers to sustained implementation they have identified: (a) identify a problem; (b) use data to analyze the problem; (c) identify and select appropriate interventions, and (d) review and measure the implementation and effects of those interventions (MCPS).

Having data is essential for LCMTs to accomplish their work. Otherwise it would be difficult to pinpoint where a student is struggling or what next steps to take. These data include reading and math Lexiles, Student Assessment of Growth and Excellence (SAGE) scores, and evidence of classroom behaviors. However, MCPS recognizes that although data collection and documentation is necessary, these alone are insufficient;

the collected information should be referred to the right people via a multi-tiered system of support (MTSS) to provide appropriate instruction and intervention for all students in the school. Elan Junior High's tiered levels of intervention represent increasing intensity and individualization in instruction and intervention.

When these tiers are applied to behavior, it is through the framework of Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports (PBIS), a behavior management framework used for developing positive behaviors in students and that supports the academic, social, emotional, and behavioral needs of all students. The implementation of PBIS, which has been embraced by schools nationwide, is not exclusively an Elan Junior High or MCPS initiative. All Utah schools are mandated by law to have a plan in place to foster good behavior and provide appropriate supports for students who misbehave. To comply, MCPS designed and provides schools with a "Tiered Supports-Intervention Finder" and an MCPS "Behavior APP," which capitalizes on technology to benefit schools.

### Theme Development

Themes were developed first from the one-on-one interviews, followed by the observations, and finally the document review. After an intensive analysis using traditional case study methods including memoing, pattern matching, and within-case synthesis, 68 codes were generated which appeared amid a numerical majority of the embedded participant groups – administrators, counselors, school psychologist, special educators, and teachers. The coding began with aggregating the text from the transcripts and documents into small categories of information and then assigning a label to each code. The numerical majority was used as an emergent defining boundary for the selected codes, while the theoretical framework was a prefigured defining boundary for the selected codes. The codes were then compared with the collected documents for parallels. The codes were recorded to show similarities across different sources of data. Many codes were reduced and combined to become part of the thematic analysis, while some codes were ultimately discarded because they did not represent the five overarching themes discovered in the study. The codes were then reduced to major themes—time, knowledge, accountability, escalating intrinsic and extrinsic barriers to success, and multidimensional programming.

### Time

Time management is a challenge for the entire school community. For school administrators, time management is problematic as new demands are expected of schools, with fewer resources and no increase of available time. As volunteer members, teachers on the LCMT do not receive a stipend for the time they spend

in these meetings and are faced with putting something else on the back burner each time they attend. However, regardless of the time that it takes, teachers report that the time is spent well. Furthermore, for all of the teacher members of the LCMT, the time they spend in the weekly meetings is outside of their contract hours. All the team members agreed that it is a commitment they make because they are all dedicated to working toward improving the outcomes for their students at risk for dropping out. During the LCMT meetings, time is also a commodity. At Elan Junior High the allotted time is five minutes per student, but sometimes that is just really not enough time; consequently, the team might spend 20 minutes on a child. Teachers outside of the LCMT also have issues with demands on their time. Harris observed that teachers are overloaded with classroom duties and legislative demands. He said, "Teachers really are overwhelmed. When you ask them to do one more thing and one more thing and one more thing, it seems like a lot."

### Accountability

The additional work that comes with interventions does not fall solely on the shoulders of teachers; other LCMT members share that burden as well. The foundation of the team is built on being accountable for showing up, participating, keeping matters confidential, knowing policy, understanding the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA), taking on the intervention strategy, seeing it through, completing it, and reporting back to the team. However, of the team's core, Michelle said, "We each have a role to play and most of that role is sharing our perspective so that we can problem-solve and help make kids be more successful." In addition to some confusion surrounding teachers' roles on the team, the LCMT experiences difficulty with maintaining accountability to the rest of the school community. Several members of the LCMT indicate there is poor communication between the team and the rest of the staff.

### Knowledge

Early in the conversation, Louis shared, "What I've found over the years is that I work with the smartest people I've ever met, and some of them are teachers, some of them are counselors, some of them are administrators." Not only does each of the members have the requisite bachelor's degrees required for their positions in the school district, but among the members interviewed, there are 11 master's degrees and one Ed.D. Furthermore, Louis believes that the team's contributions go beyond their educational backgrounds. Louis followed up by saying, "Knowledge and experience, those are important. Having people on there who know kids personally [is

important].” All of the members of the team, regardless of how long they have been in education, clearly have expertise to contribute to the LCMT.

### Escalating Intrinsic and Extrinsic Barriers to Success

Some of the intrinsic issues the team sees involve special education or mental health. The LCMT has seen an increase in cases of students whose academic difficulties appear to stem from mental health concerns. The team’s experience parallels 2018 studies that reported nearly 70% of teens aged 13-17 said that anxiety and depression were top concerns. This number has been on the rise for several years (Horowitz & Graf, 2019). Extrinsically, some of the most difficult issues are attendance, discipline, and safe-school violations. In the case of students at risk for dropping out, sometimes the team sees instances of personality conflicts between students and teachers. Also, there are the students who seem to be inexplicably struggling and failing all their classes. While most of the team members know that many of their students face trauma at home and have had adverse childhood experiences that impact school learning, sometimes, as Melody so aptly put it, “It’s junior high, and there are some kids who just for whatever reason, can’t behave and it takes a special ability to be able to handle that kind of kid.”

Anthony reported that the main issue the team deals with is truancy, “How to get kids to school, and once they’re here, how to help them improve their schoolwork.” Truancy exacerbates many aspects of the team’s work with interventions on behalf of students. Of the 19 students on the team’s agenda, eight exhibited issues with attendance. Regarding attendance, schools’ hands are tied. In the State of Utah, if a parent clears an absence there is nothing the school can really do about it.

### Multidimensional Programming

Fortunately for Elan’s at-risk population, the LCMT has almost as many interventions at its fingertips as there are issues to which to apply them. In this era of technology, team members have a fair amount of electronic information to help with tracking students and determining interventions. Elan also utilizes technology to remediate credit-deficient ninth grade students. Roger communicated that, “For failing classes we have a ‘Base-Camp’ program, a credit recovery program where students give up an elective and they can be assigned to a computer lab in the counseling office to make up credit using Grad-Point or Ingenuity.” Access to interventions has made its way into the age of technology with an application the district has designed and provides for its schools.

Members of the team were quick to relay the diverse programs the school can use to intervene on behalf of its

at-risk population. Roger relayed,

We can assign students to ‘Lunch and Learn.’ We have the opportunity for students who struggle in math to have a math study hall. And, we’ve got double-blocking of classes for students who struggle in English. For all seventh graders, we’ve been double-blocking that. We’ve been double-blocking some of the math classes where we see a low success rate among students.

According to Roger, the school has had success with these programs: “We did have, when I got here, about 85 ninth-graders out of 300 who were going on deficient of core credit. Last year that number was 21.” Elan has also put together, in conjunction with the district and with the school’s behavior team, a hierarchy of interventions available digitally or in hard copy.

Sometimes the team gets creative with issues with which they are confronted. Sheila said, “If it’s an issue of getting up in time, we’ll shorten the schedule. . . . I motivate with an, ‘I’ll buy you lunch; If you come for two weeks straight, I’ll get you lunch or get you your favorite soda or your favorite candy.’ I’ll do anything.” Sometimes the intervention is simply taking the time to build a relationship with a struggling student. For financial issues students face, the school has a food pantry that sometimes also includes donations of school supplies. However, it all comes down to having the leverage to match students to the best intervention for the best possible outcome. Michelle explained, “I think the local case management team is a place to come together and give those students who are not successful in some way their best shot at being successful in the education system.”

### Discussion

Members of the LCMT spoke positively about their experience; the team agreed that they were there to do what is best for kids, despite inevitable frustrations. All members of the LCMT reported one of the best parts of the experience is they do not feel as though they are going it alone; they felt they were part of an established support network. Members of the LCMT believed that it was beneficial to their practice that they were working with a team of people who were also aware of the struggles students were experiencing and who were working with them on interventions to help those students.

With the exception of the guidance counselors, team members felt like their caseloads for interventions were eased by inclusion of a cross-section of staff. For LCMT participants who are not classroom teachers, they stated their time on the team provided a wider perspective of what goes on in the school. Although general educators on the LCMT declared the experience positive, they struggled a bit in understanding their roles and with the added responsibility.

Regarding efficacy in administering interventions to students at-risk, the team members believed they were effective in approximately 80% of the cases managed. Some stated efficacy could be bettered by improving communication with the rest of the school about the students with whom the team works, which interventions have been recommended, and what the expectations are for those who work with those students. The factor that seemed to make the experience genuinely difficult for many members was that some students, even after the team had applied every intervention at its disposal, remained apathetic about their education, and the LCMT was unable to pinpoint the source of the apathy. However, all members agreed that even with those students, the team was committed to try its best to help children become successful.

By all outward appearances the use of MTSS is implemented with high fidelity at Elan Junior High. Elan Junior High reported that it was successful in utilizing short-term, targeted, research-based interventions to reach 93% of its at-risk ninth-grade students who were then able to move on to high school without credit deficiencies. The team reported that when a student's struggle is one that is solvable, the team was highly effective in helping that student succeed. The LCMT collectively agreed that, although the district is rolling out new guidelines for attendance, there is currently no intervention available to them that is effective in addressing truancy.

### Delimitations and Limitations

In this study, the delimitations are purposeful decisions the researcher made to limit or define the boundaries of the study. Delimitations of this study included the selection of a single case study as opposed to other forms of qualitative research: Since the purpose of the study was to understand the impact of LCMTs on at-risk ninth-grade students, this was the better choice (Yin, 2018). In this qualitative single embedded case study, the researcher chose one LCMT based on its success in intervening on behalf of at-risk ninth-grade students and the significant decrease in the number of that junior high's students who leave credit-deficient for high school. Another delimitation of this study was the purposeful decision to define the participants as those who have worked a minimum of one school semester on an LCMT and who participated in the same LCMT location during that time period. This allowed the researcher to determine the impact of an established community of practice in which the members consistently participated. Those delimitations helped define both the scope and focus of the study.

Although there were several limitations in this study that were beyond the control of the researcher, the

most relevant was the inherent limitation of the single case study design. MCPS granted access, but to only a single LCMT at a single site. After this conditional approval was received, the researcher was unable to conduct cross-case analysis between multiple LCMTs throughout the district, thus potentially raising issues of construct validity. The limitation most often cited in discussions of single case studies is a lack of reliability and replicability of obtained effects in contrast to those that could be obtained with a larger sample (Gustafsson, 2017). Therefore, the potential exists to conclude that the conclusions of this research applies to all schools and districts. This limitation could not be overcome by extending the reach of the study since the researcher was only able to locate LCMTs in the state of Utah, and more specifically, in MCPS. An additional related limitation of this study was that the participants on this particular LCMT were narrowed by ethnicity, which did not reflect the student population it serves.

### Implications

Recently, Lave and Wenger's (1991) theory of communities of practice has been applied predominately by sociologists in corporate settings to analyze business strategy. However, the origin of communities of practice was in learning theory. Redefined in learning theory for those working in a tiered structure of intervention, Lave and Wenger's (1991) supposition explains how the collective relationship between pedagogical differential diagnostic reasoning and the educational clinicians creates a dynamic, effective, and productive community of practice in the domain of heuristic intervention (Wenger, 2002).

The National Dropout Prevention Center (NDPC) identified 15 effective strategies that have positive impact on reducing dropout rates (2019). Though these can be employed as stand-alone strategies, positive outcomes are more likely when schools develop programs that utilize most or all the strategies (NDPC, 2019). Schools need to discard the notion that a one-size-fits-all approach that may include an expensive prepackaged intervention program will prevent dropout. Instead, schools should focus efforts on interventions that address students' individual needs. Both the findings from this study and the NDPC point to a specific set of capabilities identified within this inter-disciplinary, multidimensional approach, illustrated with the model in Figure 1.

Furthermore, school districts could benefit from utilizing the expertise they have at their disposal in the way of professional, trained experts who should be assembled to reach out to all students at risk for dropping out and to extend their knowledge, tacit or otherwise, to help when a student suddenly surfaces as at-risk (Wenger, 2002). It is vital that administration, and even counselors, nurture

and support the development of teacher leadership as part of these interdisciplinary teams. Findings from this study suggest that because teacher leaders must enlist colleagues to support the work of the LCMT and convince those colleagues of the imperative nature of their endeavors, teacher-leaders must be respected for their ability to collaborate with others. This ability to collaborate is a hallmark of school leadership and is crucial to achieving gains in student learning. According to Danielson (2007), working with one's colleagues is "profoundly different from working with students, and the skills that teachers learn in their preparation programs do not necessarily prepare them to extend their leadership beyond their own classrooms" (p. 15). Furthermore, this level of leadership requires proficiency in curriculum planning, assessment design, intervention, behavior, and data analysis, which are skills not typically taught in teacher preparation programs. Although teachers have a rightful and necessary place in these communities of practice, when extending membership on the LCMT, administrators must discern between inviting teacher-members who take the initiative to address problems and/or to institute new programming and who are influential and respected within the school community and teachers who are merely willing volunteers.

Additionally, while the financial input for such a program is minimal because districts will capitalize on the talent they already have available, districts will need to redirect some of their budgets for professional development into training for the individuals involved in each school's LCMT. This training can begin with school administrators, who can, in turn, relay that training to the staff until the LCMTs are well-established, at which time the trainings might shift to more nuanced trainings designed around what scholarly research has deemed the most effective interventions available. Finally, districts need to ensure program fidelity by utilizing a method for evaluation both by the teams themselves and from the district. MCPS utilizes a rubric that LCMTs use to evaluate their effectiveness periodically, which serves as a reminder to incorporate all the tenants of a community of practice and multidimensional programming. The Tiered Supports Coordinators for MCPS are working on a revision of this document that will be available to the schools in the fall of 2019.

There are several practical implications of this study which deserve further consideration. The first major practical implication of the present research is that there is a necessity for an intermediate level or tier between the teachers in the classroom and those designing and implementing interventions. For example, in their documents on structuring LCMTs, MCPS indicates the necessity for grade-level Professional Learning Teams (PLTs) that act as this intermediate step. In this examination of Elan Junior High's LCMT, evidence of

such a PLT was not uncovered. This might explain some of the difficulties the team had in communicating with the rest of the staff. The PLT would also contribute to teacher buy-in. It would be a logical step in the MTSS and PBIS frameworks the district and school utilize for providing appropriate instruction and intervention for all students in the school.

While there is value to intervening after the event, there is also value in exploring pre-interventions to shield students against challenges before they occur. Perhaps schools need to add treating the causes of dropout to the myriad of interventions used for pupils who require amelioration of their symptoms. Figure 2 represents how this would add to the multifaceted nature of intervention presented in Figure 1.

As part of successful multidimensional programming, schools must consider whether a lack of resiliency among some students is a mitigating factor on their path to dropping out. According to Lukianoff and Haidt (2018), America has taught an entire generation expertise in the habits of anxious, depressed, fragile, and vulnerable people, who never question the underlying culture in which this symptom of anti-intellectualism seems to thrive. While this study acknowledges the value to intervening after the event, there is also value in exploring pre-interventions. Schools spend a great deal of time and resources treating children who have learned to blame instead of learning to grow. In fact, this approach may even have implications in resolving the chronic issues of attendance. There is no question that there are many reasons why students miss school, many of which involve blaming struggles in the classroom, bullying, or challenges at home, and that blame game only results in their trajectory toward graduation becoming riddled with even more barriers to success. This research suggests the practical solution of building resiliency in children before they become students who have factors to blame and subsequently require intervention for their symptoms.

### Recommendations for Future Research

Considering the study's findings and the limitations and delimitations of the study, there are multiple recommendations and directions for future research. A qualitative study on school culture in those schools that utilize the LCMT model as prescribed by the district might be useful to determine if the LCMT has a broad impact at the Tier One level with their student populations. Conversely, it would be beneficial to describe the experiences of students who were cared for by an LCMT. Ultimately, not all districts across the United States use the junior high model. Thus, it would be prudent to conduct a qualitative study on the benefits of this type of programming (focused on eighth grade) to determine if it can achieve the same level of success.

A significant question left unanswered is how schools can alter the trajectory of students who encounter stressors and/or experience increased vulnerability, which are circumstances that might lead them to drop out. A qualitative study on the impact of social-emotional learning that is inclusive of programming which encourages resiliency and growth mindset is warranted. Furthermore, there is a great deal of opportunity for research to investigate whether training teachers on how they can support social-emotional learning that will bolster both the emotional needs of students and their academic success (Zaff et al., 2017).

A quantitative study on the impact of LCMTs on high school graduation rates might indicate specifically whether students who were on the LCMT caseload were ultimately able to graduate after four years of high school. Lastly, a quantitative study comparing the success of districts/schools of similar socio-economic composition versus some of the reportedly more effective single intervention programs could further validate the value of the multidimensional intervention model that utilizes communities of practice. LCMTs are used exclusively in MCPS, which is limited by geography and socio-economic status. In contrast to the experience of the Elan Junior High LCMT, schools with decidedly different geographical and socio-economic circumstances might not experience the same level of success.

While some students may benefit most from mentoring, other students may instead benefit from more clinical interventions, which follows from the unique finding that the work of intervention carried out by school professionals using inter-disciplinary collaboration is an effective approach to getting involved on behalf of students who need additional supports (Avant & Swerdlik, 2016; Dougherty & Sharkey, 2017; Freeman & Simonsen, 2015; IES, 2017). This collaboration among the members of Elan's LCMT was successful in making these involvements a more deliverable resource among the various practitioners on the LCMT, and they were able to provide more effectual front-line intervention programs to the students at risk for dropping out in their care.

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## Authors

[Jessica Grant](#), EdD, has over 20 years invested in teaching and working with struggling students in various school districts throughout the United States. She is currently teaching at the secondary level for Davis School District and serving as an interventionist. Dr. Grant enjoys pursuing research interests in education, including academic and behavioral intervention, truancy, and teacher leadership.

[Russell Yocum](#), EdD, has over 20 years of experience in educating students Pre-Kindergarten through adult and is currently a research methodologist and doctoral dissertation chair for Liberty University's School of Education. Most recently, Dr. Yocum has taught qualitative research methods at the doctoral level and enjoys pursuing a variety of research interests, including education, spirituality, criminology, and psychology.

[Glenn Holzman](#), PhD, has over 40 years of teaching and administrative experience in public schools and private Christian education. He has been an adjunct professor in the Graduate School of Education online program for Liberty University since the fall of 2006, instructing a variety of courses. He has also served as chairperson and committee member for dissertations in the Graduate School of Education at Liberty University. He is currently serving as the founding president of Elim Christian School in Houston.

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# Men of Color Transitioning to College: The Case for Community Assets, Community Programs, and Social Capital

*Dena Kniess, Eric Buschlen, and TzuFen Chang*

**Abstract:** *Transitioning from high school to college is a challenging time for young adults and can be more difficult for first generation students. In some cases, adolescents are assisted by community assets (coaches, teachers, church/family members) and community-based leadership education programs. This combination may provide youth with critical skills to navigate the collegiate environment. The authors interviewed eight adult men of color who had participated as adolescents in a cohort-based, six-month life-skill development program. The goal was to identify attributes of the program that aided in their transition to college by examining the findings through the lens of Yosso's (2005) community of cultural wealth model. The findings suggest that the structured program along with other disclosed community assets positively influenced these students' choices to enroll in college and provided necessary skills needed to navigate their first year of college.*

The enrollment in higher education continues to remain steady. Despite this, the overall success and graduation rates for first-in-family, low-income, Black and Latino students are much lower than other groups (Aidman & Malerba, 2017). For Black men, more than 50% do not attend college and even smaller numbers choose to attend four-year colleges and universities, with Black males ranking the highest in attrition rates (Strayhorn, 2017). Still, urban families and school administrators need to better align expectations for graduating men of color (Carey, 2017). Adjusting to life away from home, forming new relationships, and increasing academic demands are just a few of the challenges awaiting all first-year students. These changes are amplified when individuals may not have developed coping skills. However, social capital and other localized human assets tend to heavily support an inner-city, first-generation student's decision to attend college (Chen & Zerquera, 2017).

The purpose of this research was to understand the lived experiences of inner-city boys who completed a six-month, youth life-skill development educational program. The Power of Dad program focuses on building leadership efficacy within inner-city boys who grow up without their biological father living in the home. This project team interviewed alumni from the Power of Dad program to explore the lessons learned from the program that aided in their transition to college. To participate in the Power of Dad program, subjects grew up without fathers in the home and completed the six-month program. The sample for this data collection consisted of eight men of color ranging from 18–23 years of age who went on to attend either a community college, regional university, or a large land-grant institution. These young men participated in a larger, adjacent data collection with a purpose to

outline the efficacy of this particular community-based leadership education program (Buschlen, Chang, & Kniess, 2018). During the interview process, questions were asked related to whether a participant was attending college. If the participants were attending college, those young men could choose to voluntarily participate in an additional data collection. The research question driving this study was “How did alumni from a youth development program experience the transition to college?” This project is focused on participants who self-reported their ethnicities as African American and Hispanic. While the program is open to young men from all races and ethnicities, this data collection interviewed men of color who also self-identified as attending college. No participants from the larger data set were attending college at the time of the data collection.

## Review of Literature

While the percentage of White 25–29 year olds who attained bachelor's degrees or higher increased from 1995–2015, the White-Black gap in bachelor's degree or higher attainment increased from 13 to 22 percentage points and the White-Hispanic gap increased from 20 to 27 percentage points (Kena et al., 2016). In the last few years, a noted increase in research and scholarship around the phenomenon of Black men, attrition rates, and the role played by higher education has been explored (Wood & Newman, 2017). Though some students may leave college due to grades or finances, others may leave for different reasons. Researchers have noted several noncognitive variables, including self-efficacy, related to student departure (Krumrei-Mancuso, Newton, Kim, & Wilcox, 2013). Participation in life-skills development programs prior to college helps students develop character, self-confidence, life skills, and self-efficacy

(Buschlen et al., 2018; Higham, Freathy, & Wegerif, 2010; Hine, 2014). Lessons learned from community-based youth programs can help with the transition to college (Hastings, Barrett, Barbuto, & Bell, 2011; Hilton & Bonner, 2017). Participation in organized activities as a child or adolescent has been linked to favorable behavioral changes and heightened social development (Buschlen et al., 2018; Morris, 2015).

Prior research has noted that fatherless adolescent boys are at higher risk for academic and social maladjustment, such as poor academic performance, violence, relationship struggles, and dropping out of high school (Bishop & Lane, 2000; DeBell, 2008; Mack, Peck, & Leiber, 2015). Furthermore, even though some of them are able to enter college, these youth struggle with educational attainment (i.e., college attendance and graduation) compared to their peers from households with two biological parents (Biblarz & Gottainer, 2000; Björklund, Ginther, & Sundström, 2007). Many single parent households deal with issues such as employment, finances, stable housing, and other basic needs (Lee, 2014). Thus, it is important to identify antecedent factors which can assist young men as they transition to college life (Astin, 1993; Hilton & Bonner, 2017; Tinto, 1993). Buschlen et al. (2018) measured the lasting impacts of the Power of Dad program and noted that interviewed alumni engaged as servant leaders in their community and became mentors in the program.

The first year at college is a time of change and transition. Changes occur in living environments, academic expectations, and relationships with family and friends. Before one enrolls in college, societal messages and background characteristics shape how one views college, especially for men of color (Harris & Wood, 2016; Strayhorn, 2017). For example, racist stereotypes about men of color, including academic inferiority, criminal behavior, and disinterest in college can lead men of color to question enrolling in and their ability to succeed in college (Bush, Bush, & Wilcoxson, 2009; Harris & Wood, 2016; Wood & Newman, 2017). Researchers studying the transition to college have indicated that involvement, or engagement, with the college environment is critical to first-year student success (Aidman & Malerba, 2017; Astin, 1993; Tinto, 1993). Tinto's (1993) theory of student departure conceptualized persistence in college in terms of academic and social integration. While Tinto's (1993) theory of student departure has been widely used to understand why students leave colleges and universities, researchers have critiqued his model's applicability for minoritized student populations (Braxton, Sullivan, & Johnson, 1997; Nora, 2002; Tierney, 1992). For example, Nora (2002) found family and other support structures were important factors in individual persistence in college. For this study, we were interested in how the relationships

formed in a community-based leadership program and allowed these men of color to develop both cultural and social capital from an asset-based perspective.

Yosso's (2005) community of cultural wealth model acknowledges forms of cultural capital from different racial and ethnic groups in society. Yosso (2005) described six alternative forms of capital or community cultural wealth minoritized students bring with them to the college environment. These forms of capital were: (a) aspirational capital; (b) linguistic capital; (c) familial capital; (d) social capital; (e) navigational capital; and (f) resistant capital (Yosso, 2005). Localized social capital and social networks seemingly promote the ideals of a college education to potential students (Chen & Zerquera, 2017). In the absence of a father, supportive family members, church members, athletic coaches, teachers, and other community mentors all have the potential to serve as assets for these developing young men. The community-based system supports youth in all facets of their lives, offering a powerful pattern for success (Aidman & Malerba, 2017). Similarly, institutional climates and relationships with others, both on and off campus, enable minoritized student groups to persist in higher education (Strayhorn, 2017).

An element that has not been extensively studied is how participation in precollege leadership development programs supports the vision of academic attainment in higher education. For example, meta-analysis-based research that examined more than 50 youth mentoring programs (including leadership programs) has indicated that participation in these programs has positive implications for academic achievement of adolescents from various types of family arrangements (e.g., two-biological-parent and single-mother/father household; DuBois, Portillo, Rhodes, Silverthorn, & Valentine, 2011). However, these programs only examined the youth's academic outcomes in adolescence and did not examine whether the experiences in the programs are also beneficial for youths' adaptation to college life or their social adjustment to a new environment.

#### Leadership Development Programs and Precollege Programs

Leadership education prepares students for occupations, develops character, provides praxis for leadership skills, and allows youth to understand active citizenship while participating in their community (Buschlen & Johnson, 2014; Sessa, Morgan, Kalenderli, & Hammond, 2014). The process of leadership efficacy unfolds over time throughout one's life as the person continues to develop a leadership persona (Polk, 2013; Priest & Donley, 2014; Rosch, Boyd, & Duran, 2014; Rose, 2010). In a collegiate setting, the goal is to produce leadership learning outcomes which seamlessly connect

students to both individual and community outcomes (Buschlen & Guthrie, 2014). As a result, a need exists to better understand the intersection between the leadership learner, the setting, and how the leadership lessons learned transcend the setting. While research exists regarding the process of leadership learning within adults, less research is available regarding youth leadership learning (Brumbaugh & Cater, 2016; Guerin et al., 2011; Ricketts & Rudd, 2002).

Youth leadership development programs also provide opportunities for goal setting which may include planning for college. Key features of college access programming include academic support, social and emotional support, family involvement opportunities, leadership development, and service learning (Corwyn, Colyar, & Tierney, 2005). While the adolescent leadership development program in this study did not have college access as its primary aim, key features of college access programs, such as social and emotional support, leadership development, and service learning, were embedded in the design of the adolescent leadership development program in this study.

### The Adolescent Power of Dad Development Program

Millions of children around the world grow up without a father in the home and are in need of the service of mentors and programs which can develop life skills. The Power of Dad program is now in its thirteenth year and is dedicated to teaching 22 life skills over the span of six months that young men need in the absence of their father. The mission of the Power of Dad is to encourage, educate, and enhance the relationship between fathers and their children. This process includes a strong focus on life skills, leadership skills, service, and communication skills of young children who live without their fathers in the home. The Power of Dad program is designed to provide participants with a step-by-step mentoring process that involves physical, mental, spiritual and emotional challenges. The program takes students on a journey and deals with their past, present, and future. The program ultimately prepares and releases them through a rite of passage/graduation in which participants are honored before their peers and loved ones. Each participant finishes the program with a heart that has been healed, a clearer purpose and a game plan to accomplish that purpose. While the curriculum is focused on life skills, many elements in the syllabus focus on transferable leadership skills.

Buschlen, Chang, and Knies (2018) outlined key takeaways from the Power of Dad program. Prior to the cohort-based program, young men reported a violent and angry existence, which lacked effective communication and trust toward men. Some of the participants self-reported suicidal ideations (Buschlen, et al., 2018). The

program helped the participants better understand who they are, how to work as a member of a team, and how to engage their community through service. Participants reported that the act of being served by mentors in the program enticed them to serve their communities in exchange. Almost all of the young men returned to serve as a mentor in the program. This brings to light one of the key findings from the larger data collection – transcendent leadership lessons (Buschlen, et al., 2018). The program, the mentors, and the founder of the program, by means of the curriculum and investment into these young men, seemingly transcend the setting. The Power of Dad program provided a life changing experience, and for some, a lifesaving experience (Buschlen, et al., 2018).

### Methodology

To further understand this phenomenon, participant narratives, both individual and shared, were examined. Researchers chose to apply the concepts found in transcendental phenomenology which is used to distill many common experiences to a universal set of related data (Creswell, 2013). When implementing this methodology, researchers explore the phenomenon, remove any personal connection to it, and collect several samples from multiple participants who have experienced the phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994). The phenomenon examined in this project revolved around the shared stories and experiences of alumni who had completed a leadership and life skills program. Individual interviews were conducted with a single member of the research team and one participant at a time. A different member of the research team managed subsequent follow up interviews.

### Participants

The participant pool was generated with support from the Power of Dad organization. A mailing list was created and emails were sent out, phone calls made, and text messages sent to potential subjects. The initial sample (n=10) participated in a larger, parallel data collection related to the program's overall efficacy. If a subject also attended college, then that person was asked to participate in this additional project. Participants were with the interviewer for close to two hours, if the participant also attended college. The latter third of the interview time was focused on their collegiate experience related to this data collection. The sample for this project was (n= 8) and represented male participants ranging in age from 18 to 23 years who grew up without their biological father in the home. The young men were currently enrolled at colleges or universities at the time of the data collection. Seven of the participants were African American and one was Mexican American. All were from the same metropolitan, Mid-Western

city. The program served all races and ethnicities. The larger sample included two White participants who both worked in their community and did not attend college at the time of the data collection.

### Data Analysis

Following full transcription by Rev.com, a member of the research team read the transcripts and filled in any missing information based on inaudible gaps (outlined on the Rev.com transcript). Then, each researcher created individual data sets based on personal interpretations of themes. Following that, researchers met and discussed individual findings and potential themes. Interrater reliability was implemented in this endeavor (Creswell, 2013), which included an ongoing dialogue to discuss and exchange thoughts and ideas regarding the emerging themes (Creswell, 2013). After the major themes were constructed, a member of the research team initiated an outreach to a small group of interviewees to confirm and further refine the themes. This was done to enhance the outcomes through data triangulation (Mills, 2010).

### Findings

Three key themes emerged from the interviews regarding the subject's persistence in college: precollege influences, first year challenges and successes, and the leadership program's lasting impacts. Each theme is discussed below and relevant quotes from participants pertaining to each theme will be provided. The interviews yielded data related to the participants' recollection of how their social capital or community assets also helped to shape their academic vision. Again, the interview protocol focused on three distinct time frames: their initial experiences at college, their challenges and successes in the transition, and their application of the lessons learned from the youth leadership development program. While the larger, initial data collection focused on the impact and efficacy of the life skills provided by the Power of Dad program, the latter data collection focused on how these young men navigated their first year of college.

**Precollege Influences as Community Assets.** During the interviews, participants often described a person or community asset, whether it was a family member or mentor or an event that served as a catalyst for them to pursue a college education. In the absence of a father, many of the subjects reported participation in ongoing church activities, Boy Scouts, Big Brothers, and formal/informal athletics. Many of them also reported interactions with other community assets who helped them develop a desire for academic attainment. For example, participants noted that their mothers influenced them to attend college, which is a common motivating

factor (Carey, 2017). Most of the young men relied heavily on the assistance and trust found in their relationships with mothers, aunts, and grandmothers, in the absence of a male:

I decided to attend college because of my mom. I was seeing her struggle. My mom went to college and graduated, having three kids, three young boys at the time, and seeing how she was motivated by us. Now I'm motivated by her. That was the big thing.

I seen [sic] her [mom] struggle, and me being me, I don't like seeing my mom struggle at all, so that just instilled in me to try to become a man, be a better man than my father was.

Another participant also described the influence of family members on the desire to attend college: My grandmother and my mom [attended college]. My mom has a master's degree; my grandmother has a bachelor's degree; and my sister is now currently in college. It's just the norm in our household that you go to college.

The above quotes from participants illustrate the role family members played in the expectation to attend college. Other participants noted that the decision to attend college was assumed. Family members served as a motivator to attend college, or aspirational capital in Yosso's (2005) model. One participant explained:

The honest answer is family-wise it was like, 'Oh yeah, you're going to go to school,' but I really wasn't getting that type of support during that time about school. Basically, I was all on my own doing it, establishing it, and taking out these loans, doing something I've never done before. ... I just kind of winged it, signed all these papers that I have no idea about.

Although his family provided the impetus and verbal encouragement to attend college, he noted that he did not have family members or others to help explain the student loan paperwork and other forms entering college students need to sign. Another participant echoed similar feelings stating that it was "second nature" that he was going to attend college, but he "... didn't know what college I wanted to go to, or what I wanted to do in college." Two young men credited the program's director for helping to provide the desire to create future life goals:

That's what shifted the atmosphere for me, seeing that they were actually trying to help. They wanted to do something and change me. That had driven me and seeing the expectation that he had for the young men there. He knew we had potential to do whatever we wanted in life. I wanted to change something in life.

One participant articulated the need for reciprocity as he now works to become a community asset for others. Others reported the connections found through the mentoring of athletic coaches and other mentors as a means to develop vision:

I've been a mentor in the program and I'm also a track coach right now. I graduated high school this past year, started college, and now I'm a track coach. I coach basketball at Center Courts also, so I'm giving back to the community as well.

While family members motivated the majority of the participants to attend college, others were motivated by a goal they had set for themselves. One participant indicated that though his family did not play a role in his decision to attend college, he "wanted what would get me to the next level." The community assets (parents, mentors, coaches, community partners, family members outlining future goals) provided the motivation and aspirational capital (Yosso, 2005) to pursue a college education. Participant experiences during the first year of college are highlighted in the next theme.

**Successes and Challenges in Navigating the First Year of College.** Participants remarked on the size of the institution in their initial comments. The participants described the change below:

It was bigger than I thought. ... We went on tours, but I didn't really know where I was going. When I got on campus, I learned my way pretty quick, for two or three days learned the big things, the main things. It was just giant, a lot to take in.

After adjusting to the size of the campus, participants focused on their academic coursework and then on forming relationships with other individuals on campus. Strategies the participants used to navigate the college environment during the first year were time management, communication, and self-motivation. One participant described his strategy for success in college as

...being successful at college, yeah, dedication. Successful at college is time management, basically, and then when you're going to class and then you've got to go to work or you've got to go to work and then go to class, you've got to find time to get assignments done. ... not only that, but communication, because there's going to be things that come up where you can't attend class, and you've got to go out of your way to try and get a hold of your professor.

Participants realized that they had to take ownership for their experience at college to reach their academic goals, a lesson taught in the leadership program. Many of the young men noted that their college friends were

"partying" and making "bad decisions" while they tried to avoid those choices. They knew the dangers associated with that sort of choice and chose to focus on their goals.

One participant stated, "My plan to start off was just to get all A's. I succeeded at that. Another was just to remain focused on everything." The main focus for the participants was succeeding academically in terms of GPA and then establishing their social network. One participant noted that being away from home "gave me space; it gave me independence." He further went on to state, "I've met new people, new friends, people that are well-driven and want to graduate, you know? That's encouraging when you hang around people who want to graduate and get things done."

In addition to classes, events during the first week of classes were also helpful in meeting others. One participant noted, "I met people quick, because everybody's trying to meet people. The welcome week, all the freshmen try to get their groups of friends. It wasn't hard." While forming relationships with others was important, one participant noticed that he needed to balance his social interactions. He realized he was very social, but also that he had "to be around people but to a certain extent. Now I'm to a point where I can't deal with people too much because it's ruining me." Although this participant did not mention if it was relationships at home or college that were causing him difficulty, he did indicate earlier in the interview that the environment he was raised in was emotionally volatile. College provided an escape from his environment, but he remained careful about managing relationships both at home and on campus.

Other than trying to maintain balance among classes and relationships, a main challenge that participants noted was the financial cost of college. A participant mentioned the difference between the first and second semesters in terms of college costs:

Money was a challenge for a stretch [of time]. For the first semester I was all set, had the financial aid and everything covered. When the second semester came, and I got my financial aid and I didn't get a refund, I just had no money. Then I got the callback for a job, but that was not 'til two weeks into the second semester, and you have to buy your books the first week.

Another participant noted the large expense of a college education pressured him to "make it work." He further stated, "but I feel like a lot of things are expensive for no reason. So expensive." Tuition, fees, textbooks, and living expenses can add up and at times are not advertised well in terms of total college costs. Another participant described his struggle with ADHD and how it was challenging to focus in college when there are many

things competing for one's attention. Another interesting finding revolved around the fact that many of the subjects did not feel shamed or intimidated by the thought of asking for help. They sought out help from others around them in the college environment. The three impacts of the Power of Dad program are further discussed in the following section.

### Leadership Program's Impact

When participants were asked about the lessons from the six-month, cohort-based, youth leadership development program, they described how goal setting, interpersonal relationships, and mentoring were key in navigating their college experience. Many reported not feeling shamed or intimidated by the thought of asking for help. They sought out help from others on a regular basis. This concept of asking for help is not common among this group of young men, but it is an element taught in the leadership training program. One participant indicated that the program "helped with my communication, my understanding of basic sympathy, basic understanding of other people. [The program] gave me great motivation also."

Other participants talked about being an example and mentoring others largely because the founder and the coordinator of the youth leadership development program was an example for them. Another participant talked about utilizing empathy and openness to help a friend whose parents were going through a divorce. He said, "I started to talk with her and tell her about my life, like 'It'll be all right.'" Several of the participants returned to mentor in the youth leadership development program and others sought out leadership or service opportunities on and off campus. A few examples of service activities include becoming a high school track coach, working in soup kitchens, working with individuals with disabilities, and passing information on about voting. The young men articulated that before the program, service to others was not part of their lives. Following the program, after being served by others, the young men's capacity for civic engagement increased.

In addition to goal setting, interpersonal relationships, and mentoring, the foundation provided through the youth leadership development program in this study enabled some participants to seek out other leadership or academic programs in college. Participants in other leadership development programs commented on how participating in these programs gave them navigational capital (Yosso, 2005). A participant in a leadership development program for his major in business indicated that he did feel better prepared than his classmates:

I know people that weren't in those programs, and they seemed pretty lost. They had a general concept of what to do, but they didn't actually know. I had

the steps, then they introduced us to people that were higher up, sophomores, juniors, and seniors, in the business college. They're our mentors in the programs, so you get to talk with them, ask them how college was, like panel discussions.

Another participant in another program indicated how it was similar to the youth leadership development program and stated the program, "[Made] sure you that you're on top of your schoolwork, studying, good grades. It's basically the same as [youth leadership development program], just on a college campus." Participants sought out these programs not only to help in navigating the college environment, but also to reinforce and build upon the lessons they learned in the youth leadership development program.

### Discussion

The participants' experiences with community assets and the youth leadership development program as pre-college adolescents confirm prior literature pertaining to the transition to college, college access programs, and Yosso's (2005) community of cultural wealth model. All participants remarked on navigating the size of the institution and establishing a strong academic record. They described the need to "remain focused. Keep my head in the books." The need to establish themselves academically, in terms of GPA, is indicative of the academic integration component of Tinto's (1993) model. Socially, the participants were not concerned about their ability to make new friends or maintain connections with old friends. It should be noted that many of the participants reported weak or failing relationships prior to the program. While this does not disconfirm the applicability of the social integration aspect of Tinto's (1993) model, it does illustrate that participants were confident in their abilities to establish new relationships at college following the program's intervention and their own personal growth.

Although the youth leadership education program in this study was not designed for the explicit purpose of creating access to college, the program introduced and implanted lessons in the participants that allowed these fatherless men of color to navigate the collegiate environment. This occurred through the intervention's framework and through the social capital gained by completing the program (Aidman & Malerba, 2017; Hastings et al., 2011; Higham et al., 2010). The lessons on goal setting, listening and empathy, relationship building, and time management were ones they carried with them into college and lessons that seemingly transcended the program for these young men. Goal-setting lessons helped the participants stay focused and committed to a larger goal. As one participant stated, he needed to "keep my

eye on the prize, because I veer off somewhere, I have to remember why I'm actually here." Key features of college access programming that were present in this youth development program were academic support, social and emotional support, and leadership development (Corwyn et al., 2005). The academic support and leadership development were evident in the goal-setting lessons. The social and emotional support provided through lessons on listening in the program and through the mentorship provided by community assets throughout the program propelled these young men forward.

One item that all participants commented on was the high cost of college. As college costs continue to rise, it will be important for similar programs to address college costs for individuals by providing financial aid workshops to help plan for postsecondary education. At least one participant in the study reported he had enough money to cover the first semester but did not have the amount he needed to cover future semesters. Information on college costs, the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA), grants and loans would help students understand their options for paying for college.

Additionally, the youth leadership development program cultivated aspirational and navigational capital in participants (Yosso, 2005). The participants talked about how conversations with community assets such as family members or future goals for themselves led to their decision to attend college. One participant stated that he "wanted to go to college because I want to own my own business one day." Goals and encouragement from the program and individuals in their lives built aspirational capital in participants. A few participants noted how taking part in this youth leadership development program influenced them to seek out other leadership programs and opportunities when on campus. Whether it was a program related to their major or a program focused on leadership development, participants described how they were able to understand what they needed to do in college. As one participant stated, he "had the steps" where he noticed other classmates struggling with what was expected of them. Seeking out new opportunities and programs to maximize networks is representative of Yosso's (2005) navigational capital. Participants had aspirations for their futures and sought out opportunities to maximize their future goals.

### Limitations

This data collection captured a unique set of participant experiences which may differ as the program and program's cohort changes from year-to-year. Therefore, the findings from this research project are not generalizable to other settings or programs. Also, since participants were asked to recall past experiences, time may have sharpened those experience as it relates to their

current lives and this too may limit the findings. Since many of these young men have served the program as mentors, after participating in the program, they may have developed a stronger connection to the program and its lessons. Additionally, this study did not examine other influences in the college environment that may have aided their development such as high school pre-college events, meetings with guidance counselors, and similar types of programs.

### Implications for Community Partners

From this study, there are implications for both community partners and higher education professionals. Community partners and out-of-school educators/mentors play a key role in the analogy "it takes a village to raise a child." Community-based programs such as the Power of Dad need to seek additional grant funding to support the development of community youth while working with educators to develop a focused, success-based curriculum for the target population. These organizations should also engage in structured assessment to ensure the learning process is effective. Research partnerships, similar to this endeavor, can be expanded to showcase the overall need for programs by partnering with local university faculty or research firms. The structured research can also be used to solicit grant dollars as evidence of programmatic effectiveness.

Individuals working in higher education should seek out and connect with similar youth leadership development programs in their communities. Outreach professionals in colleges and universities could collaborate with these structured programs to provide information to individuals on the college admission process, financial aid, and other leadership opportunities at their institutions. Connecting individuals in these programs with higher education professionals can help them build early networks (additional mentors) to help students reach their goals. By creating partnerships with these organizations, the curriculum may be amended to include sessions directly related to college success, financial aid, persistence, registration, and the like. Faculty, engaged in research, can connect to programs to assist with curriculum, programmatic assessment, grant writing, and research.

In this study, the primary concern from participants throughout the interviews was college affordability. To help with the cost, higher education professionals, especially those working in financial aid, should consider offering grant or scholarship opportunities to help individuals who complete youth leadership development programs to help cover the rising costs of college. This is especially vital when dealing with low-income individuals and men of color. Even a grant or scholarship to cover the cost of books would be helpful in alleviating the financial stress on participants.

## Conclusion

The transition to college is challenging for most students. When coupled with the additional life stressors found within the narratives of these eight young men, their perceived success and persistence in college seemed slight, at best. Yet, their participation in the Power of Dad youth life-skill educational program developed critical skills, leadership, and various forms of cultural capital needed to navigate the collegiate environment while being supported and guided by their community assets. Specifically, for this group, lessons on goal setting, relationship development, and listening seemingly kept them on track in the collegiate environment. Higher education professionals are recommended to reach out to community partners who assist inner-city, first-generation students in similar developmental programs to provide information regarding the college application process, financial aid, and navigating the college environment. Fatherless men are faced with many barriers that hinder them from educational attainment; thus, beyond participation in any youth leadership development program, it is very important to continue providing these young men with resources that can facilitate their transition and success in college.

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## Authors

[Dena R. Kniess](#), PhD, is an Assistant Professor of Counselor Education and College Student Affairs at the University of West Georgia.

[Eric Buschlen](#), EdD, is an Associate Professor in the Department of Educational Leadership at Central Michigan University.

[TzuFen Chang](#), PhD, is an Assistant Professor of Child, Adolescent, and Family Studies at California State University-Bakersfield.

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# *The Journal of At-Risk Issues*

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Manuscripts should be original works not previously published nor concurrently submitted for publication to other journals. Manuscripts should be written clearly and concisely for a diverse audience, especially educational professionals in K-12 and higher education. Topics appropriate for *The Journal of At-Risk Issues* include, but are not limited to, research and practice, dropout prevention strategies, school restructuring, social and cultural reform, family issues, tracking, youth in at-risk situations, literacy, school violence, alternative education, cooperative learning, learning styles, community involvement in education, and dropout recovery.

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[www.dropoutprevention.org](http://www.dropoutprevention.org)